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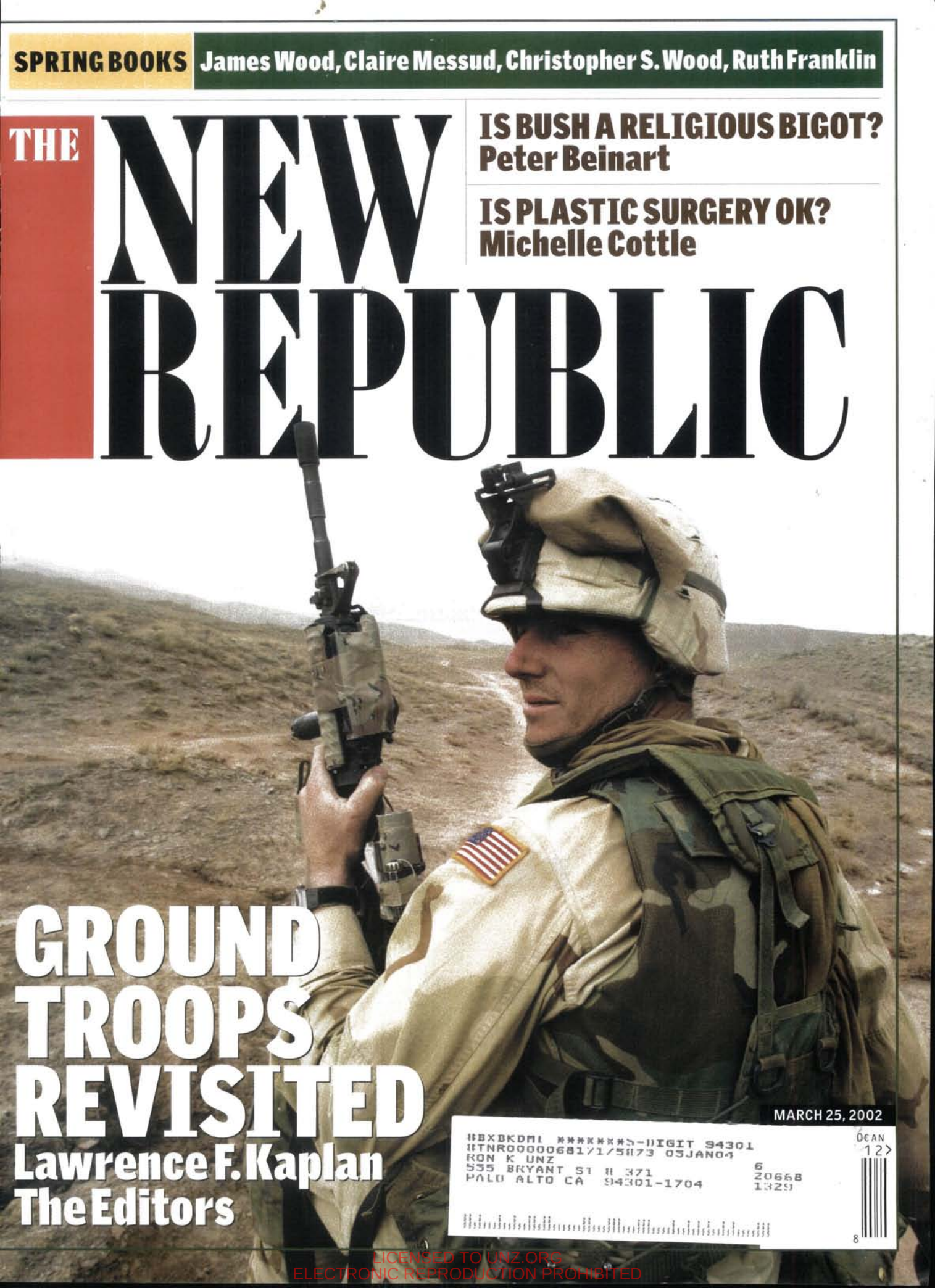

GROUND TROOPS REVISITED

Lawrence F. Kaplan
The Editors

MARCH 25, 2002

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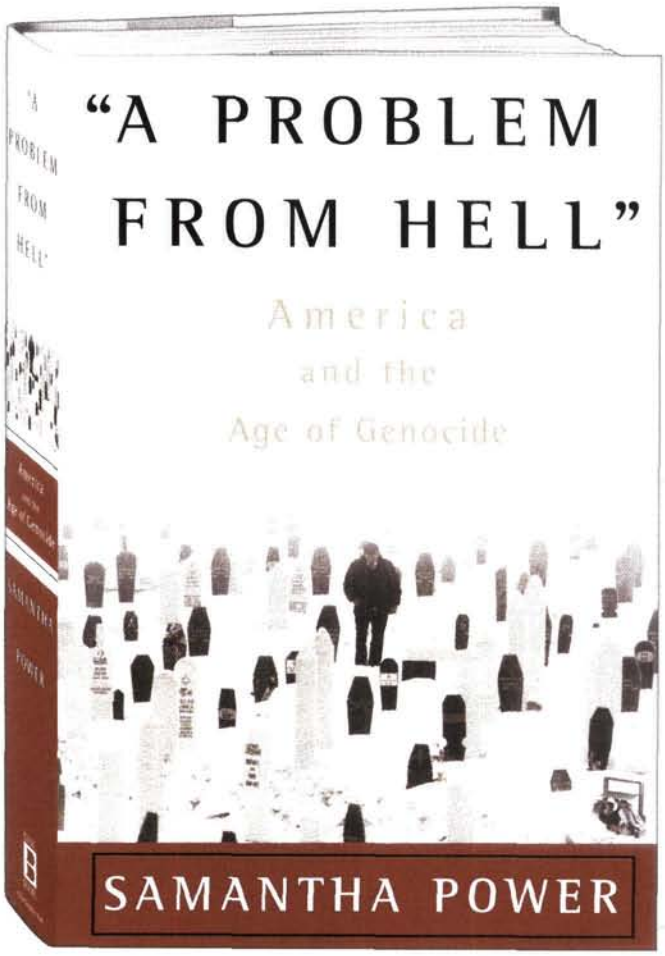
Why is the United States a Bystander to Genocide?



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CORRESPONDENCE

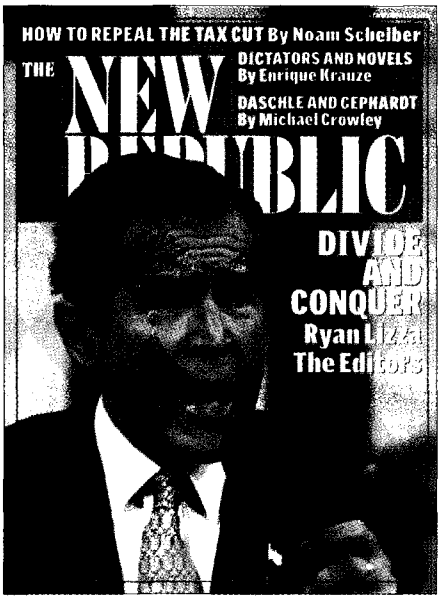
Tax free

TO THE EDITORS:
I read Peter Beinart's TRB on Billy Tauzin with great interest because I too have been following his political career ("Accounting," February 11). I remember a piece on ABC about overseas tax havens and a particular seminar that was offered to anyone interested in evading U.S. tax laws. To my surprise, Tauzin was one of those speaking at the seminar on how to evade taxes. Beinart's call for Tauzin's resignation was right on track. Here is a U.S. representative teaching the wealthy how to evade taxes. If everyone took advantage of this overseas haven, who would pay *his* salary? This issue deserves much more attention.

KATHRYN WEDDINGTON
Troutville, Virginia

Romantic side

TO THE EDITORS:
By eliding over critical issues, Yossi Klein Halevi's Jerusalem Dispatch "September's Children" serves the function of legitimizing an unacceptable aspect of the Indian political landscape (February 11). Halevi alludes in passing to a thread of anti-Muslim bias that runs through segments of Indian polity. What is surprising is a glaring omission by Halevi of the nature and character of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling Hindu nationalist party. The prime minister of India, his home minister, and almost every BJP member of his cabinet—as well as large numbers of the BJP membership nationwide—are also members of the RSS (National Association of Volunteers), whose ideology is grounded in the writings of the late M.S. Golwalkar (aka "Guruji" Golwalkar). Here is a sample of his "We, or Our Nationhood Defined," a core text of the RSS: "From this standpoint, sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the non-Hindu peoples in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu race and culture.... [I]n



one word, they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights."

And what of Bal Thackeray of the Shiv Sena party in Bombay, a prominent and influential ally of the BJP? From a *Time* magazine article of September 11, 1995: "Thackeray has stated that he admires Hitler, hinting in interviews that if Muslims didn't 'behave,' they would meet the same fate as Europe's Jews. When asked in a recent TV program called 'Ru-Ba-Ru' ('Face to Face') whether he wanted to be the Hitler of Bombay, Thackeray retorted, 'Do not underestimate me. I am [the Hitler] of whole of Maharashtra and want to be of whole of India.'"

MANOHAR KANURI
New York, New York

TO THE EDITORS:
I appreciate the optimism in Yossi Klein Halevi's Jerusalem Dispatch on Indian-Israeli relations, but I'm wary of some of his assumptions. I'm one of those Americans who traveled in India in the early 1970s, writing a book about Mahatma Gandhi, and I just returned from there after three weeks of traveling with my daughter, who has lived in India for the last six months. It's true: Israelis are everywhere in India, but I'm not sure the romance is quite what Halevi projects. They have a bit of an "ugly American" reputation among some Indians, given their drug use and high-handedness. Part of the attraction may simply be due to India's being inexpensive, and Israelis don't have a lot of places they can go and feel welcome.

Also—I say this with sadness and realize it stirs a hornet's nest—both peoples have very powerful communal allegiances that in many ways supercede their democratic forms of government. The business opportunities brought about by improved relations, however, are very real and much more likely to grow as time goes by. The current "anti-terrorist alliance" opens the door.

DANIEL R. FOLEY
New York, New York

Top dollar

TO THE EDITORS:
I detect a basic misunderstanding about the international role of the U.S. dollar in John B. Judis's article "Purchasing Power" (February 11). Judis believes that the "United States can run huge current-account deficits (about $400 billion in 2000) without being subject to the fiscal discipline that other nations must endure" because of the position of the U.S. dollar as the international reserve currency. Alas, that is nonsense. The United States can run large current-account deficits because foreigners are willing to pour money into the United States in order to buy stocks, bonds, real estate, bank deposits, factories, Hollywood studios, golf courses in Hawaii, etc. The reserve currency status of the U.S. dollar has nothing directly to do with these capital inflows. Central banks do engage in what are called "official reserve transactions" in order to make sure that the U.S. current-account deficit is offset by a commensurate net capital inflow. But the proportion of the current-account deficit financed by official reserve transactions is quite small.

Conversely, countries like Thailand must pay attention to the size of their current-account deficits because, unlike the United States, they cannot count on a steady supply of foreign capital willing to invest in their economies enough to offset their current-account deficits. It is not, contrary to Judis's argument, because the Thai baht doesn't have international reserve status. Therefore, it is simply false that the United States "would suddenly feel pressure to rein in its foreign debts for fear of suffering a loss in the dollar's value" if the U.S. dollar lost its international reserve currency status. The United States would only feel such pressure if foreigners were no longer willing to invest in the United States and buy U.S. assets like real estate, stocks, or bonds. The reality is that the United States gains very little benefit from the position of the

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dollar as the main international reserve currency. There have been estimates of this by economists, and the size of the benefits in several cases has been quite small.

SIKANDER KHAN
Riverside, Connecticut

JOHN B. JUDIS REPLIES:
Did I overstate the point? Having the dollar as a reserve currency and as the main currency for international transactions encourages the purchase of dollars and dollar assets (Treasury bills) that cushions the United States from some downward pressure on its currency and upward pressure on its interest rates that other countries experience. But it doesn't exempt the United States, as became clear in the late 1960s and late 1970s—and will become clear again if foreign purchasers lose interest in buying both our products and our real assets.

All talk

TO THE EDITORS:
In "The Old Way," Noam Scheiber advises Democrats to demagogue the Medicare issue in order to roll back the Bush tax cut (February 11). He admits that this is dishonest and that the real debate is about the size of government but that Republicans have made it impossible to have the debate honestly because they have a strategy to "force deficits through huge tax cuts." Even if this were a Republican strategy (it isn't), why does it call for dishonesty?

As a conservative, I am in general in favor of more limited government and lower taxes. I have good and sufficient reasons for this position, and I feel no need to be dishonest in arguing in support of it. Scheiber favors larger government and higher taxes. One assumes he has good and sufficient reasons. Why does he feel he must be dishonest, cut "intellectual corners," and resort to demagoguery to promote his position? I guess his ideas won't sell any other way.

WALTER W. ERICKSON
Saratoga, Wyoming

Applied path

TO THE EDITORS:
In response to Siddhartha Mukherjee's article "Fighting Chance," I would like to address the following point (January 21). AIDS could have become treatable any time after 1984-1985, since all of the biologic knowledge required for "triple therapy" was available at that time: HIV had been shown by French scientists, in 1984, to cause AIDS, and the presence in HIV of an aspartyl protease enzyme had been discovered by Japanese scientists in 1985. (That three anti-AIDS drugs would have to be given concurrently—because of the virus's ability to mutate rapidly—was generally assumed, based on the prior experience of physicians in attacking leukemic cells or the bacteria that produce tuberculosis. But until the mid-1990s, there weren't three drugs to give.) Neither the discovery of HIV nor the characterization of its enzymes reflected "curiosity-driven research," as Mukherjee described. An international war was on to identify the agent that caused AIDS and to find a biochemical target for drugs that would inactivate that agent. Many laboratories competed to win that war.

So why didn't AIDS become treatable in the mid-1980s? Because application of this biologic knowledge was retarded by politico-economic factors—i.e., the number of years it would probably take to have an effective drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—and the consequent costs of developing such a drug. These made it unlikely that such drugs would generate profits for the companies that produced them. But in the 1990s the FDA changed its regulatory policies regarding approving drugs for AIDS; very soon thereafter the first protease inhibitors appeared, and "triple therapy" became the therapeutic norm.

Now our nation faces grave dangers from other untreatable infections—like Ebola Fever—which might be used as weapons of mass destruction. Finding ways to treat such infections will doubtless be accelerated if scientists motivated solely by their own curiosity make discoveries about the causative agents, much as Professor John Collier did for the anthrax toxin. But we can't assume that such individual decisions about what's interesting to study will alone yield drugs for preventing or treating these infections. We must also mount "Manhattan Projects" with the specific goals of discovering such drugs and of removing political and economic hurdles to their development.

RICHARD J. WURTMAN, M.D.
Cecil H. Green Distinguished Professor of Neurosciences
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

Bad Faith

A MONTH OR SO ago, in a speech to the National Religious Broadcasters' annual convention, Attorney General John Ashcroft said the following: "Civilized individuals, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator. Governments may guard freedom. Governments don't grant freedom. All people are called to the defense of the Grantor of freedom, and the framework of freedom He created." And with those words, Ashcroft encapsulated everything that is admirable, and everything that is awful, about the Bush administration's understanding of religion in the United States.

Conservatives seemed genuinely puzzled by the outcry over Ashcroft's words. "I think General Ashcroft was quite inclusive," said Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council. "He made reference to Christians, Jews, and Muslims all recognizing the Creator as the origin of freedom." And in a sense, Connor was right. Not long ago a conservative cabinet member from a conservative administration, speaking before a conservative Christian audience, might not have mentioned Jews and almost certainly wouldn't have mentioned Muslims. Ashcroft was being ecumenical in a way that, say, Ed Meese probably wouldn't have been.

One reason is that the United States is more religiously diverse than it was two decades ago—Muslims, for instance, played a role in George W. Bush's electoral considerations in 2000 in a way they never did for Ronald Reagan. Another reason, of course, is September 11. Respect for American Muslims is now a critical component of American foreign policy.

But I don't think Ashcroft's ecumenicism is purely instrumental; I think he genuinely believes it. As TNR's Gregg Easterbrook and others have noted, conflict between religious denominations has declined in recent years as traditionalists from various faiths have joined in solidarity against what they perceive as a growing secular threat. Conservative Catholics and Southern Baptists have put aside their theological hostility to make common cause against abortion. Evangelicals and Orthodox Jews have come together to push for government support of religious education. And the affinity isn't only political; it's cultural as well. Writing in TNR last January, my friend Tevi Troy, an Orthodox Jew and former Ashcroft aide, noted that Ashcroft probably employed more Orthodox Jewish staffers than any other senator. "[A]s a devout person," Troy wrote, Ashcroft "feels an affinity to other believers."

The same goes for Ashcroft's boss, President Bush. After September 11, any American president would have insisted that most American Muslims do not support terrorism. But Bush, as TNR's Franklin Foer has noted, made a particular point of absolving Islam itself. Influenced by conservative intellectuals who argue that nothing truly religious can be evil, Bush quoted the Koran and declared that "Islam is peace." Last November, Bush hosted the first-ever White House dinner marking the start of Ramadan. Muslim dignitaries were invited to pray in the East Reception Room before listening to Bush tell the assembled that "America seeks peace with people of all faiths."

And with that line, Bush exhibited the same moral blindness as his attorney general. Of course the United States seeks peace with people of all faiths. But what about people of no faith at all? In fact, the Bush administration *never* mentions nonbelievers; it never suggests that they, too, possess a moral sense that leads them to abhor terrorism and defend freedom. To the contrary, Bush has said, "The true strength of America lies in the fact that we are a faithful America by and large." He has described the job of political leaders as "call[ing] upon the love that exists not because of government, that exists because of a gracious and loving God." As Vice President Cheney put it last year, "Every great and meaningful achievement in this life requires the active involvement of the One who placed us here for a reason."

Don't get me wrong. It's perfectly fine for Bush, Ashcroft, and Cheney to declare their faith. It's even fine for them to speak about the good they believe religion does in the world. But Tony Blair has done that as well, and yet he's also said, "This atrocity is an attack on us all, on people of all faiths *and on people of none*." As far as I can tell (and the website *beliefnet.com* chronicles George W.'s statements on religion), President Bush has never uttered a similar thought. And when he and his top advisers, in hundreds and hundreds of statements, never miss an opportunity to exclude nonbelievers, it's hard to believe the exclusion is purely accidental. Consider, again, Ashcroft's speech last month: "Civilized individuals, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator.... All people are called to the defense of the Grantor of freedom...." Are individuals who don't see "the Creator" as "the source of freedom and human dignity" uncivilized? And how can "all people" be "called to the defense of the Grantor of freedom" if some people do not believe the Grantor exists? In lauding the attorney general's ecumenicism, conservatives ducked the real issue: that for this administration, celebrating the dignity of all believers has become a way to impugn the dignity of those who believe in no religion at all.

Politically, there are reasons for the Bush administration's behavior. While as many as 14 percent of Americans profess no faith, they are so unpopular among the population at large that affirming their decency is far more politically perilous than affirming the decency of Jews or Muslims. An April 2001 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed that 66 percent of Americans viewed atheists unfavorably—almost twice the percentage that held a negative view of Muslims. And a survey that same year by the Kaiser Foundation, *The Washington Post*, and Harvard University found that 69 percent of Americans would be bothered by a close family member marrying an atheist.

There are ideological reasons as well. Many cultural conservatives equate secularism with relativism, and they genuinely believe that religion is the only source of morality. I think that's theoretically simplistic and empirically absurd—I doubt atheists and agnostics lie, cheat, steal, or fly airplanes into skyscrapers any more than anyone else. But if Bush and Ashcroft really think that, then they should have the courage to say it, and open up their arguments to scrutiny and rebuttal. What they are doing instead is worse: implicitly writing atheists and agnostics out of America's moral community. When they describe the country they love, they describe a place where people of different faiths live in harmony and equality, and where people who follow no faith simply do not exist.

Speaking last month in Beijing, President Bush declared: "Freedom of religion is not something to be feared; it's to be welcomed, because faith gives us a moral core." No, freedom of religion is to be welcomed because it allows some people to practice their faith—and, through it, to find a moral core. And it allows others to find a moral core far from churches and synagogues and mosques—secure in the knowledge that their government considers them just as civilized, and just as American, as anyone else.

PETER BEINART

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Black Hawk Up

THERMOBARIC, THERMO-shmaric: The Battle of Shah-i-Kot Valley has established what should have been perfectly plain from the beginning of the American action in Central Asia, which is that victory—that is, the destruction of the forces of Al Qaeda and the Taliban and the subsequent stabilization of Afghanistan—is not possible without the commitment of American ground troops.

The momentous mistake of Tora Bora, where the climax of Operation Enduring Freedom turned into its anti-climax, as we gave control of the porous border with Pakistan to a bunch of lethargic and corruptible Afghan irregulars—that mistake was corrected at Gardez. There we did our own work. There it was Black Hawk Up, you might say. The caves in Shah-i-Kot Valley were struck repeatedly from the air, but this time airpower was accompanied by twelve hundred American troops, two hundred allied troops, and one thousand Afghan troops, and they were what finally made the difference. Eight Americans died in combat, but their deaths do not seem to have shaken the American government or the American people, because it is clear to both the government and the people that these soldiers died in a good fight for a just cause. And the American people, who forget many things, have not yet forgotten that this war began with three thousand American casualties, all of them noncombatants.

The strategic lesson of Gardez—that finally the ground can be controlled only from the ground—deserves to be pondered at precisely this moment, when the implications of the Afghan war for American warfare are beginning to be discussed. This will be a fateful discussion for the future of American strategy. Indeed, futurism is precisely its subject. Even before September 11, the Rumsfeld Pentagon was a temple of strategic futurism, of the religion of technology, though the early fantasies had mainly to do with the militarization of space, which was always broached in a revolutionary spirit, as if the nature of war was about to be forever transformed. Now the revolutionary spirit, the technological utopianism, is being directed at the machinery of conventional warfare.

There is no doubt that the technological prowess of the American military is awesome, and that this prowess is to be admired not least for the American lives that it saves. A pilotless plane is a moral advance, at least for our side. The outcome in Afghanistan has been determined by a dizzying display of fancy hardware: JSTARS, thermobaric bombs, drones, and the extraordinary infrastructure of "information warfare," which allows spotters on the battlefield and satellites in space to collaborate on the timing and the precision of air strikes. If there are no atheists in foxholes, there are no Luddites in foxholes, either. Obviously American power owes its world-historical edge in large measure to American technology.

One of the immediate results of the success of our military hardware was a certain cockiness about the role of ground troops in warfare, which seemed to be growing increasingly anachronistic. Since there are no Luddites in foxholes, the excited reasoning went, perhaps there need be no foxholes. This strident belief in high-tech victory comported nicely with the Pentagon's post-Somalia anxiety about putting American soldiers in harm's way. Never mind that war *is* harm's way. Those who called for the early introduction of American troops into Afghanistan (this magazine among them) were roundly derided as armchair so-and-sos, or worse.

But the din of the victory party drowned out the rumblings from Afghanistan. It turned out that the Taliban had been defeated but the war had not yet been won. None of our astounding contraptions managed to prevent the enemy from regrouping and fighting again, or to find Osama bin Laden (as a consequence of the limitations of satellite imaging it became very dangerous to be a tall man in Afghanistan) or Mullah Omar, or to keep Afghanistan from dissolving into new internecine conflicts among its exceedingly unattractive warlords. For the accomplishment of such objectives, military and political, there turned out to be no substitute for the grunts on the ground. And if the grunts leave the ground, and do not themselves take part in the searches through the caves and the policing of the jittery new peace, then many of our accomplishments will be quickly undone. So excuse us, but we—and everybody else who insisted on the strategic indispensability of the individual American soldier—were right. ■

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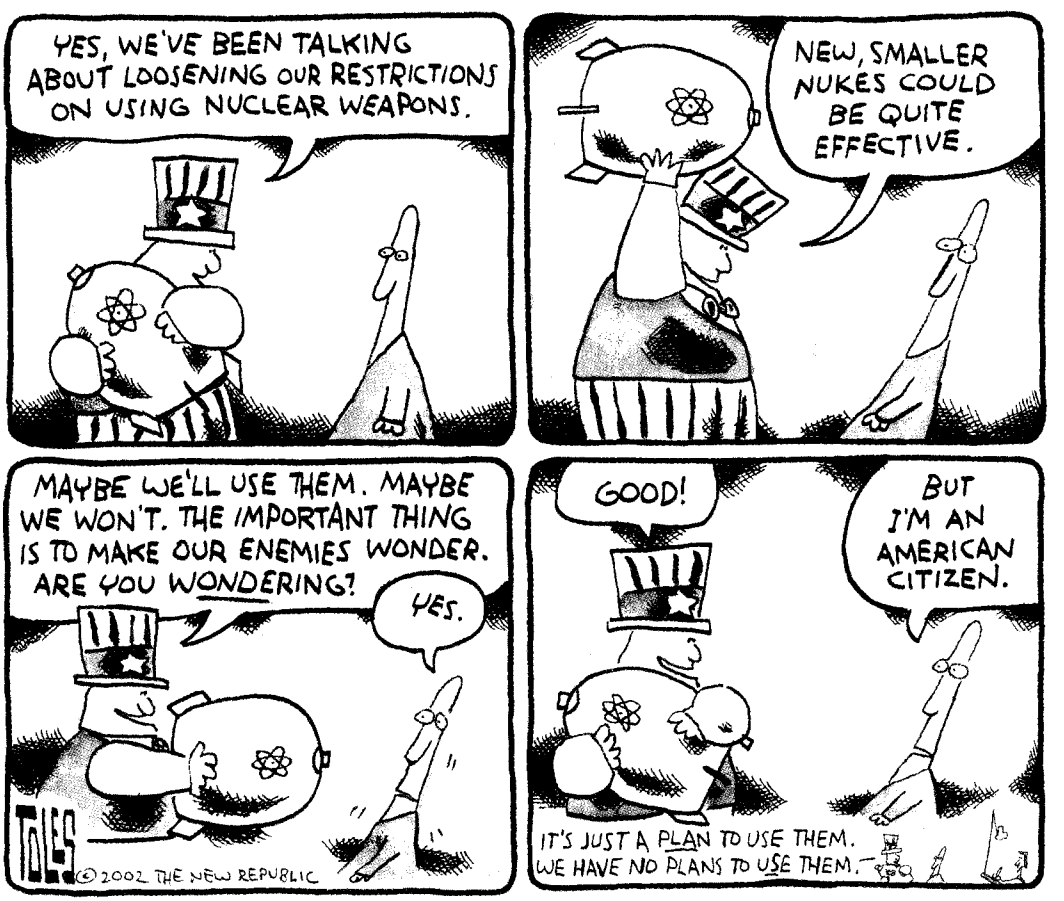
N O T E B O O K

BAD DEBT: Amazing how times change. Just six years ago House Republicans threatened to impeach Clinton Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin for using accounting gimmicks—such as borrowing funds from federal employees' retirement funds—to stay under the federal debt ceiling, which the GOP was loathe to raise. Fast forward to the present, when House Republicans are demanding that Bush Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill do . . . exactly the same thing. Usually the debt ceiling—the limit on how much the government can borrow—is raised by an act of Congress, which is what President Bush has asked for this year. But Democrats have seized upon a debt-ceiling vote as an election-year opportunity to attack Bush and the Republicans for squandering the surplus and dipping into once-sacrosanct Social Security revenues. Thus, the GOP is trying to avoid a vote by asking O'Neill to work the same kind of economic wizardry that was considered a fireable offense when Rubin did it. But don't worry. If this fails Republicans have a backup plan to spare themselves a debate over surpluses and Social Security: They'll sneak an amendment raising the debt ceiling into a popular piece of legislation—most likely an emergency appropriations bill to pay for the war in Afghanistan. Of course, the last time congressional Republicans tried something like this was in 1997, when they added an initiative on census sampling to a flood-relief bill, a move that backfired spectacularly when incredulous flood victims found out what was holding up relief funds. We're sure our troops in Afghanistan will be more understanding.

HERE WE GO AGAIN: The handwringers are at it again. Pope John Paul II has announced gravely that he is "saddened" by the violence in the Holy Land, and has pledged the Roman Catholic Church's help in bringing peace. But what standing does he have among Yasir Arafat and his fellow terrorists—who have presided over the exodus of Palestine's Christian population from an increasingly fanatical society. (In their current frame of mind, it is highly unlikely that most Palestinians would take advice seriously from an infidel.) And the pope's credentials among Israelis are rather compromised as well—given that in May of last year he stood utterly silent while Syria's ophthalmologist-dictator, Bashar al-Assad, lectured him about the eternal guilt of the Jews for the death of Jesus. Kofi Annan has also weighed in—denouncing Israel for retaliating against the relentless terrorist attacks on its civilian population in every corner of the country and demanding that it withdraw from its "illegal occupation" of Palestinian lands. At least he had the good taste not to accuse Israel of ethnic cleansing—given that as head of the U.N. blue helmets (the organization's "peacekeepers" in Bosnia) in the mid-1990s, Annan helped prevent international intervention against the worst ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Holocaust. In fact, the U.N. secretary-general is almost surely responsible for the destruction of more Muslim homes and the breaking apart of more Muslim families than is Prime Minister Sharon. Annan, not surprisingly, has endorsed the recent peace proposal by Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah (fed to *The New York Times*' Tom Friedman in a desperate effort to change the subject from Saudi Arabia's role in September 11). That proposal—which would require Israel to give up all of East Jerusalem, not to mention the Golan Heights—goes far beyond what former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Arafat at Taba and Camp David. But the bloody events of the last 17 months, which constitute Arafat's most concrete response to the most pliant Israeli government in history, have proven to just about every reasonable Israeli that even Barak's proposals were


YES, WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT LOOSENING OUR RESTRICTIONS ON USING NUCLEAR WEAPONS.
NEW, SMALLER NUKES COULD BE QUITE EFFECTIVE.
MAYBE WE'LL USE THEM. MAYBE WE WON'T. THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO MAKE OUR ENEMIES WONDER. ARE YOU WONDERING?
YES.
GOOD!
BUT I'M AN AMERICAN CITIZEN.
IT'S JUST A PLAN TO USE THEM. WE HAVE NO PLANS TO USE THEM.
TOLES
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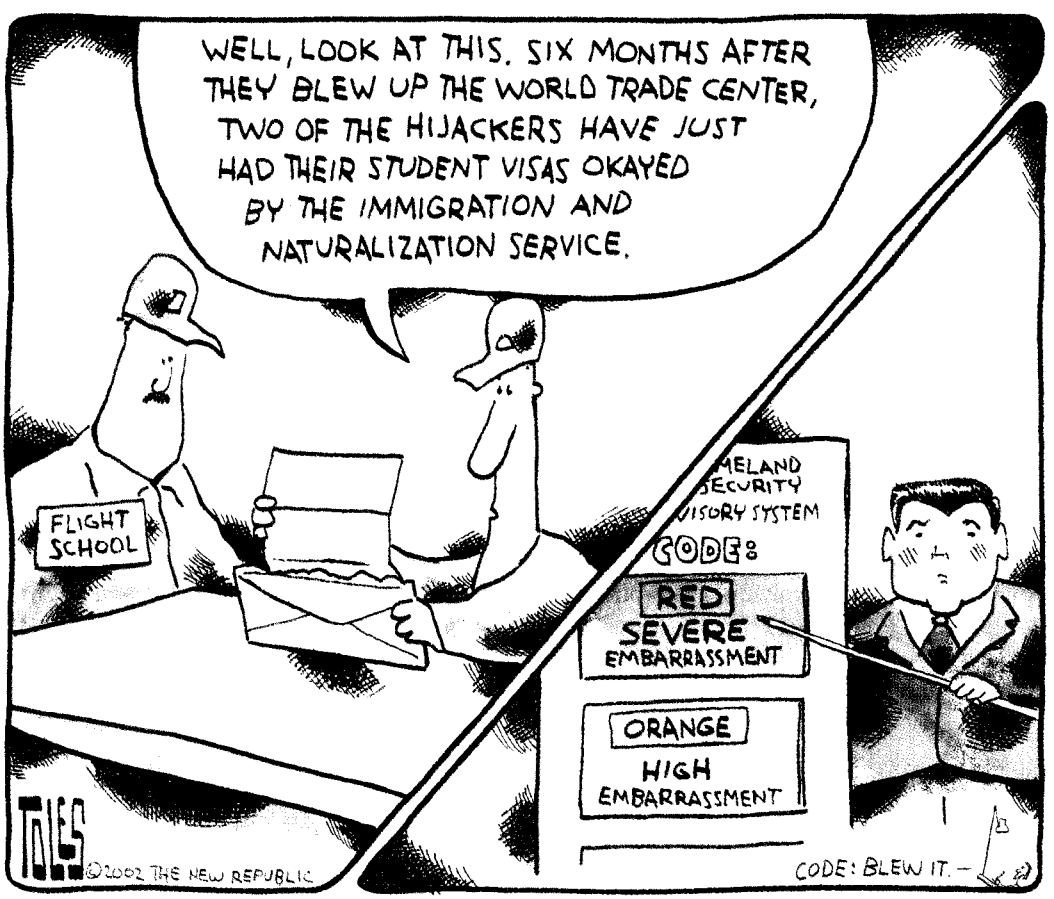
dangerously generous. In fact, the rump Palestinian state that exists today testifies powerfully enough to the dangers of insufficient Israeli vigilance. Under the Oslo agreements, emerging Palestine was allowed a police force of 30,000, equipped with 15,000 rifles and pistols and a few hundred heavy machine guns. In other words, only enough arms to police itself. But by now, partly as a result of Israel's withdrawal, the Palestinians have smuggled and built sufficient war materiel to equip a significant military force. It does not take an especially lurid imagination to grasp that any government of Israel will find this intolerable. This means that Palestine—when its borders are finally defined—must not be permitted to abut any other Arab country, and that its ports and airports will have to be secured against the deadly contraband with which the Palestinians have so deftly destroyed their most recent opportunity for independence. Dozens of Palestinians have committed suicide in this latest round of terrorist warfare. But no matter what Annan, the pope, or anyone else in the "international community" says, Israel will not itself adopt this macabre model of politics as self-immolation.

UNSAFE AT ANY SPEED: "Women love their SUVs and minivans ... because of their safety," declared Maryland's Barbara Mikulski, one of the senators who this week helped kill the John Kerry-John McCain proposal to raise fuel-economy standards for new U.S. vehicles 50 percent by 2015. Maybe women (and even men) do love SUVs because they think they're safe. Problem is, it's not true. A vehicle's size is a less important predictor of its safety than its overall engineering—which is why, in crash tests staged by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the private Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, cars and SUVs of the same weight often receive vastly different safety ratings. In general, SUV occupants fare better than those in cars in front-to-front and side-to-front collisions but worse in rollovers—making them about as safe overall. (It's worth noting, however, that while SUVs don't make their occupants notably more safe, they do imperil others; someone driving an SUV is much more likely to kill *someone else* than is someone driving a regular car.) But even if Mikulski were right and we really did need SUVs for safety, that's still no reason not to improve fuel efficiency. Over the last 25 years Detroit has built ever more efficient engines and drivetrains. It's just that most of the new efficiency has gone into more horsepower rather than improved mileage. Today's new vehicles on average accelerate about 20 percent faster than those in 1975, even though average vehicle weight has grown. We could still have our SUVs, but with much better gas mileage, by channeling the engineering improvements of modern auto engines away from acceleration and into efficiency. Unless, that is, Senator Mikulski wants to argue that driving faster will make women safer.


WELL, LOOK AT THIS. SIX MONTHS AFTER THEY BLEW UP THE WORLD TRADE CENTER, TWO OF THE HIJACKERS HAVE JUST HAD THEIR STUDENT VISAS OKAYED BY THE IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE.
FLIGHT SCHOOL
MELAND SECURITY VISORY SYSTEM
CODE:
RED
SEVERE EMBARRASSMENT
ORANGE
HIGH EMBARRASSMENT
TOLES
©2002 THE NEW REPUBLIC
CODE: BLEW IT.

SPEAKING OF WEASEL WORDS: "Those are weasel words.... Compassionate conservative is just like Al Gore talking about 'practical idealism.' They're designed to mean nothing. I think we need to say in plain words, 'I am a conservative.'"—presidential candidate Lamar Alexander, January 7, 1999

"I have come to admire and respect the term 'compassionate conservatism' because it defeated me badly in the Republican primaries in 1999.... So I think President Bush has given a good, clear definition of that and has done a real good job."—Tennessee Senate candidate Lamar Alexander, March 11, 2002 ■

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White House Watch

White Out

By Ryan Lizza

For all his "change-the-tone" rhetoric, there are some forms of bipartisanship President Bush will not tolerate. Just ask Mike Parker, the erstwhile head of the Army Corps of Engineers. Parker, a balding, rotund former Mississippi congressman with a bushy mustache and a heavy drawl, was on Capitol Hill two weeks ago testifying before the Senate Budget Committee. Republican Kit Bond, Democrat Kent Conrad, and Parker himself all agreed on one thing: The budget for the Corps proposed by the White House was a joke. Bond spent five minutes gesturing wildly and railing against the invisible staffers at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) who drew up the numbers. Conrad, the Democratic chairman of the committee, agreed that the budget was ridiculously low. Which is not surprising, considering how important Corps projects are to members who need to secure federal pork for their districts.

But in his response, Parker, an ex-lobbyist and a buddy of Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott, did the unthinkable: He told the truth. Instead of defending the numbers cooked up by OMB, he winked and hinted that, like last year, the White House would eventually cave in and approve the money needed to pay for all those wasteful Corps projects. "When I was on the Energy and Water subcommittee on appropriations in the House," Parker testified, "I always looked at OMB, and never had those warm, fuzzy feelings toward them. I have found that after being in the administration and dealing with them, I still don't have those warm, fuzzy feelings." The room erupted in laughter. A little later, commenting on OMB's reputation for lowballing its budget numbers, Parker commented in a sarcastic drawl, "I wouldn't be so brash as to say this is the case here. But you'd have to ask OMB as far as what their opinions are." It didn't take long for OMB to strike back. Furious, Budget Director Mitch Daniels wrote Bush's senior White House aides a scathing memo about Parker's performance on the Hill. Parker was forced to resign the following week. Anonymous Bush aides said the president was sending a signal: Stray too far from administration dogma, and you'll get kneecapped.

Given the Bush administration's reputation for stability, Parker's firing was big news. Compared with the revolving-door Clintonites, the Bush White House has been remarkably stable; in fact, Bush's entire original Cabinet remains intact. But now that the president has been in office for more than a year, this spring may offer disgruntled (or disgruntling) Bushies the first acceptable moment to head for the door. And as they do, it will become ever more clear which kind of people thrive in this administration and which don't.

The most precarious set of appointees are those with patrons other than the president or vice president themselves. Nobody thinks Bush had a personal role in Parker's hiring; he handed off the patronage to Lott. As a result, Parker was fired for the kind of disloyalty that would not imperil the job of someone closer to the president. Consider Paul O'Neill. When Bush tried to sell his tax cut as a fiscal stimulus last year, his famously off-message Treasury secretary expressed doubt that it would speed up the economy. In January, after Bush accused Tom Daschle of wanting to raise taxes, O'Neill went on television and pronounced that Daschle "has not called for raising taxes this year." Bush promoted the House stimulus package after 9/11; O'Neill dismissed it as "show business." Just last week Bush gave a speech taking credit for lifting the economy out of recession, while O'Neill declared: "It seems quite clear now that our economy maybe never suffered a recession." And how has O'Neill been punished for all this double-crossing? At most, he's been asked to lay low; but he's never been publicly reprimanded, let alone asked to resign. Speaking of Parker's stray comments, one source close to Bush says, "Paul O'Neill has done the same thing a hundred times. But to get rid of Paul O'Neill, Dick Cheney would have to admit he made a mistake. Whereas with this guy it only requires you to say Trent Lott made a mistake."

And the administration has been happy to say just that—abandoning Lott's candidates and blaming him for their failures. In fact, from the White House's point of view, the Senate minority leader's personnel recommendations have been one disaster after another. Curtis Hébert, a Lott protégé whom Bush made chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, resigned and told *The New York Times* that he was pushed aside because of Ken Lay's influence over the White House, a story that still dogs Bush. Lott crony Parker turned out to be a debacle. And Lott's friend Charles Pickering, nominated to a federal appeals court, has become an albatross around Bush's neck. As with Hébert and Parker, the White House doesn't blame Pickering; it blames Lott. As one White House source says, despite his last-minute intervention to try to save the judge, Bush's attitude is, "This is not my guy. His agenda is not my agenda. You [Lott] were supposed to have the votes for this."

The second group unlikely to thrive in the Bush White House—even if they were chosen by Bush and even if they remain loyal to his agenda—are intellectuals. Maybe it's their characteristic desire to speak out that gets them into trouble; maybe it's their tradition of freewheeling debate. Whatever the reason, they've tended to annoy the White House even when they generally promote the party line. The first high-profile brain to depart was University of Pennsylvania Professor John DiIulio. He and Bush were friends, and Bush made DiIulio's ideas about faith-based anti-poverty work a cornerstone of his presidency. But that didn't stop DiIulio from flaming out after public fights with the religious right—"Bible-thumping doesn't cut it," he said during one famous row—and conservatives on the Hill. "The sort of people who are good about thinking up ideas are not necessarily the sort of people who are good at getting them done," says a Bushie about DiIulio's exit. David Frum, a leading conservative

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What Part of "No Law" Doesn't Congress Get?

David R. Henderson is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

Suppose representatives of an industry pushed for a law giving them a monopoly on disseminating information about political campaigns and candidates. We would be outraged, right? Our outrage would be based on our belief in two important principles: first, that government should not grant monopolies, and second, that Congress should not violate freedom of speech and of the press.

It's time for outrage. Because the industry representatives have been pushing for such a law for years. And Congress is about to pass such a law. The industry: newspapers and broadcasters. The law: federal campaign finance "reform."

The new law would make it a crime for various groups to spend money advocating the defeat or election of a given candidate or ballot proposition. The restrictions apply to the thirty days immediately preceding a primary election and the sixty days preceding a general election. In other words, **competing voices are silenced when it matters most for them to be heard.**

So, for example, if a candidate had voted for restricting abortion or for restricting guns, neither a pro-choice group nor a pro–Second Amendment group would legally be able to spend money pointing these things out. During those thirty-day or sixty-day periods, by contrast, newspapers and broadcasters would still be free to report, fairly or unfairly, on the various candidates. Thus, the new law would give newspapers and broadcasters a monopoly on information. More accurately, it reduces competition—one of our saviors from the worst effects of this law will be the Worldwide Web.

You might say, "So what?" If you, like most of us, get tired of all the attack ads around election time, won't this law give a welcome relief? It might, although never underestimate the ability of smart people to get around restrictive laws. But even if it does give you relief, notice the cost of this relief. **The cost is our freedom of speech.** When the folks at the constitutional convention passed the First Amendment, they weren't trying to give free speech and freedom of the press only to people who were rich enough to own newspapers. They wanted everyone to have those freedoms so that people could speak out against whatever upset them. That's why they said, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging freedom of speech." What part of "no law" does Congress not understand?

Ironically, the advocates claim that their goal is to keep money out of politics. It takes a lot of money to buy a newspaper or TV station. Peter Jennings, his producers, and his writers will have their say on TV every night. The rest of us, though, who are already legally prevented from giving more than $1,000 to a candidate's campaign ($2,000 under the new law), will be further limited. We might want to give to groups that support our views, but those groups will be prevented from voicing those views when it most matters. What the law really does is keep competing voices out of politics.

— David R. Henderson

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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intellectual who went to work as a Bush speechwriter, was seen by the press as running afoul of Bush's code of loyalty after his wife told friends that he wrote the "axis of evil" line in Bush's State of the Union address. Bob Novak argued this probably got Frum fired, but it didn't (Frum had told people before the State of the Union that he was leaving). Actually, Frum left because of his frustration at not being able to write and speak openly. And Paul Wolfowitz, the former university dean, faces a similar problem. Most of Bush's foreign policy aides agree with Wolfowitz's hawkish views. But many dislike his style: In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Wolfowitz spoke obsessively about going after Iraq when the rest of Bush's team was concentrating on Al Qaeda. The resulting tension was captured perfectly in an anecdote reported recently in *The Washington Post*. After Wolfowitz spoke out of turn and beat his Iraq drum during a national security meeting, the president dispatched career Bush man Andy Card to dress him down.

So WHO WILL be next to leave? In a recent interview, Cabinet punching bag Christine Todd Whitman refused to say that she would stick out Bush's full term. Card has always said 18 months is the average tenure for a White House chief of staff. Paul O'Neill continues to disappoint tax cutters by undermining Bush's fiscal arguments (though he is getting credit for hunting down terrorist assets). Even after Norm Mineta's heroic portrayal in the *Post* series—"[Expletive] pilot discretion! Get those goddamn planes down!"—the lone Democrat in the Bush Cabinet remains on everyone's list for early retirement.

But the Bushie least likely to survive isn't Whitman, O'Neill, or Mineta. And he doesn't fit into any of the problematic categories: He's not a disloyal bureaucratic hack, a freewheeling intellectual, or an out-of-step Cabinet member. In fact, he is a former corporate chieftain: Secretary of the Army Thomas White, the eleven-year Enron executive who joined the administration last June. If he goes, it will have nothing to do with this White House's quirks. Rather, it will be for that timeless Washington reason: scandal.

White has been mired in the Enron scandal since the company went bankrupt. From 1998 to 2001, he was vice-chairman of Enron Energy Services (EES), which seems to have cooked its books as much as the rest of the company. On top of that, he's got serious conflict-of-interest problems. At EES, White lobbied members of Congress to privatize utilities on military bases, which could have helped Enron reap billions in government contracts. And sure enough, in his first weeks on the job as secretary of the Army, White began pushing the privatization plan. Recently, White revealed that as secretary he has had 29 phone calls or meetings with Enron executives. And earlier this month the bipartisan leaders of the Senate Armed Services Committee accused White of giving them an "inaccurate representation" of his Enron holdings during his nomination process.

White House support for White seems to be eroding. Last Thursday a reporter asked what Bush thought about the fact that White has failed to divest himself of certain Enron holdings even though he promised the Senate Armed Services Committee he would do so as a condition of his confirmation. Ari Fleischer declined to make even a perfunctory declaration of presidential support. Rather, he read a legalistic statement that strained to point out that White hadn't run afoul of any federal ethics rules; he just didn't comply with his promise to the Senate.

And now another shoe seems ready to drop. Public Citizen says it is about to release a report that will essentially accuse White's Enron division of price-gouging during California's energy crisis last year, something that would have been prevented by the price caps that Enron and the Bush administration so vehemently opposed. Public Citizen says it will call for White to resign. It may be the first Naderite proposal that this president adopts. ■

How Peggy Noonan sees politics.

Right Reverent

By JONATHAN CHAIT

IT WAS DURING the summer of 2000 that Peggy Noonan's adoration of George W. Bush began in earnest. The GOP candidate, she wrote in her *Wall Street Journal* column, "seems transparently a good person, a genuine fellow who isn't hidden or crafty or sneaky or mean, a person of appropriate modesty." Over the next year or so, she went on to call him "respectful, moderate, commonsensical, courteous," and "a modest man of faith." She has seen in him "dignity" and "a kind of joshy gravitas." And this was before September 11. Since then, he has risen in her estimation. The president has "a new weight, a new gravity, a new physical and moral comfort." He possesses "a sharp and intelligent instinct, an inner shrewdness." He is "emotionally and intellectually mature."

The interesting thing here isn't Noonan's devotion to the president—most conservatives praise Bush, just as most liberals criticize him—but rather the personal nature of that devotion. She exhibits little interest in the president's policies except as windows into the greatness of his character. And Noonan is not alone in this politics of hero worship. She shares a sensibility with pundits like Mark Helprin, a fellow *Journal* contributor who penned speeches for Bob Dole in 1996, and Noemie Emery, a contributor to *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review*. In fact, the genre seems to be in vogue on the right.

The hallmarks of the hero-worship style are a Manichaean moral sensibility, eloquent prose, and assertion rather than argument. This might seem like a harmless, even refreshing, counterpoint to the politics of personal destruction, which both parties now disdain as mindlessly partisan and corrosive to civic health. But Peggy Noonan's glorification of George W. Bush isn't a departure from the politics of personal destruction at all. It's the very same thing.

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NOONAN, LIKE BUSH himself, invests considerable meaning in the phrase "good man." ("Good man" is also the president's favorite tribute when announcing a nominee.) The term suggests an all-encompassing personal uprightness that trumps any particular questions about professional qualifications or issue positions. The good man can be trusted to do the honorable thing.

For conservatives, of course, the modern model of the good man in politics is Ronald Reagan. And Noonan, his former speechwriter, has carved out a role for herself as the Gipper's swooning head cheerleader. Her most recent book, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan,* casts the former president in almost mythical terms. "It was [Reagan's] character—his courage, his kindness, his persistence, his honesty, and his almost heroic patience in the face of setbacks," her book claims, summarizing its central contention, "that was the most important element of his success."

Indeed, Noonan sees character as virtually the *only* element of Reagan's success. To the minimal extent that she addresses Reagan's policies, she considers them outgrowths of his personal integrity. She writes, for instance, that Reagan "was by nature a conservationist because he believed what [his mother] told him: Man was made in God's image and given dominion over natural things." What about his environmental policies and his fiercely pro-development Interior Secretary James Watt? Noonan does not even mention them. She glides over Reagan's divorce and indifferent parenting; instead she lavishes attention upon his poor, character-building childhood, his kindness to underlings, and other personal virtues. Her biography has all the moral nuance of a fairy tale.

If Reagan helped establish the good-man theory of politics among conservatives, Bill Clinton confirmed it—by serving as the quintessential bad man. Just as Reagan's policies were seen as an extension of his inner goodness, Clinton's policies were deemed an extension of his inner evil. Clinton, in Noonan's columns, does not just pursue misguided policies; he pursues them with malicious intent. "They are atheists. They don't believe in God," she quotes the Miami mayor as saying of the Clintonites in a column on the Elián Gonzalez affair. She dismisses the possibility that Clinton believed he was acting in Elián's best interests and speculates that Castro blackmailed him, sexually or otherwise. ("Is it irresponsible to speculate? It is irresponsible not to," she explains.) She ends the column by wondering "what Ronald Reagan, our last great president, would have done." One answer is that her hero "would not have dismissed the story of the dolphins [sent by God to rescue Elián] as Christian kitsch, but seen it as possible evidence of the reasonable assumption that God's creatures had been commanded to protect one of God's children." She concludes, "But then he was a man."

Given the popularity of Clinton's policies and the unpopularity of his personal behavior, Noonan's characterological analysis dovetailed neatly with the political interests of the Republican Party. But it is striking how easily Noonan and her associates have transposed it onto the post-Clinton era. Even Al Gore's fiercest conservative detractors did not, during the Clinton years, put him on the same moral plane as Clinton. In fact, for most of his political career, Gore had the reputation of something of a Boy Scout. But when he won the nomination, Gore quickly came to embody the moral depravity of liberalism. Noonan, in fact, worked herself into such a moralistic lather that by mid-fall she considered Gore "not fully stable" and "altogether as strange and disturbing as Bill Clinton." For her part, Emery wrote a cover story for *National Review* after Gore sewed up the nomination, tabbing him "WORSE THAN CLINTON," and by fall he was worse than that: "self-obsessed, conniving, dangerous," "a monster willing to trash the whole country." (The tactic was handy with other threats as well: When John McCain became a danger to Bush, conservative hero-worshipers attacked even him. Helprin, who has spent his career writing about martial valor—and who wrote poetically in 1996 of Bob Dole's wartime bravery—attacked the Republican apostate as "not honorable" and committing "betrayals.")

THE PROBLEM WITH Noonan's brand of hero-worship isn't that character doesn't matter. Reasonable people can disagree about the proper weight to place on personal virtue versus ideology in evaluating a politician. But for Noonan and her ilk, conservative ideology and personal virtue are so deeply intertwined that it is virtually impossible for a good person to pursue liberal policies or for a conservative politician to be morally flawed. And this allows Noonan to view similar sets of facts in wildly inconsistent ways. Earlier this year Noonan wrote an entire column praising Bush for prohibiting his staff from leaking to the press. One year before, she denounced Clinton for the same thing. "The code of omerta," she thundered, "ran strong and was obviously enforced." Noonan defended Bush's vicious attacks on McCain in the South Carolina primary, which included racial innuendo and disparagement of his military record. "You make the best case possible for yourself and what you stand for, and you paint your opponent in less attractive light," she lectures. "That's what politics is." Unless, of course, a Democrat is practicing politics. "Al Gore is surrounded by tough mean operatives whose sole political instinct is to rip out the other guy's guts and dance in the blood," she later raged.

Noonan's unstated assumption is that Democratic politicians do not have the moral right to, well, do what politicians do. She attacks Clinton for "unleashing the fierce energy of your hatred into the national bloodstream, and getting all your people out there on television every day to hate for you," as if Clinton loyalists ruled the airwaves unopposed for eight years. She sneers that "the endlessly calculating Tom Daschle"—in Noonan's world, only Democrats have pollsters—"did his hair up and got made up" to do a speech. Vanity is another telltale liberal trait. Emery approvingly cites Bush's observation about Gore—"The man dyes his hair. What does that tell you about him? He doesn't know who he is."—as evidence of his sound judgment. But wait: Reagan dyed his hair, too! Somebody needs to get the catechism straight on this point.

In one preelection column, Noonan went so far as to assert that Gore doesn't actually believe his political positions, but

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hews to them out of expediency. On partial-birth abortion, she writes, Gore "supports something he knows to be sick and wrong." On education, he "knows the most hopeful proposal of our time to make government schools better is the school liberation movement—including scholarship vouchers..." but because teachers unions oppose them, "Al Gore lies and says vouchers are bad." "Al Gore knows that it is responsible and constructive to allow greater freedom and choice in Social Security," she continues. "But he lies and says it's bad." Noonan presents no evidence of the bad faith she attributes to Gore. She simply assumes that no one who holds his policies can be well-meaning.

In other words, the seemingly sweet hero-worship in Noonan's writing is merely the flip side of all the traits that have made politics a death struggle—think impeachment and Florida—in recent years. If politics is a struggle between good ideas and bad ideas, a compromise can be found. If it is a struggle between good people and bad people, then absolute victory and absolute defeat are the only options. ■

Why plastic surgery helps you get ahead.

Bodywork

By MICHELLE COTTLE

OVER THE YEARS, Alice Patterson has endured every health problem imaginable—"I've lived a reckless life," she chuckles meaningfully. Now in her seventies, the longtime disabilities advocate has trouble with her hearing, her vision, her legs, and her heart. She is soft and round (exercise has long been out of the question), with smiling blue eyes and pale pink skin that has begun to take on the papery fragility that comes with age. Even so, the preternaturally upbeat Patterson is in constant motion, bouncing around in her chair, waving her hands, laughing with her entire body. A devout Christian, she is a poster child for learning to embrace whatever God throws your way. Except ... Leaning forward suddenly, Patterson sweeps the flyaway blonde bangs from her forehead and asks excitedly: "Now do you see?"

The proffered forehead is striking because of what you do *not* see: wrinkles. A few weeks ago, Patterson—who asked for a pseudonym to avoid embarrassing her employer—joined the swelling ranks of Americans who have received botox treatments, the wildly popular cosmetic procedure in which a doctor injects a diluted strain of the botulism toxin into a patient's face, paralyzing the nerves and muscles that cause frown lines. (Last year alone, doctors botoxed an estimated 1.6 million Americans.) Now, while from the eyebrows down Patterson shows the telltale creases of age, her forehead is smoother than that of a woman 40 years her junior. Patterson is so thrilled with her results that "next, I want to get rid of these," she bubbles, running index fingers down the lines on either side of her nose and mouth. This, she admits, will be a much bigger commitment. While the botox took only minutes and was relatively inexpensive (a round of shots runs about $500 in the nation's capital), de-lining her lower face will require surgery and cost Patterson closer to $7,000. Her advocacy job doesn't pay much, but Patterson plans to head back to the surgeon's office "as soon as I can save enough pennies." She will also have to confess her plans to her co-workers—they haven't remarked on her botoxification, but a full-blown face-lift will be harder to hide—at least one of whom she is certain will be "appalled."

And after all the pain, expense, recovery time, and potential embarrassment, this sunny senior expects to look in the mirror and see ... an old woman. "I'm no spring chicken," Patterson acknowledges in a soft, breathy voice. "I don't want to look young. I just want to look pleasant." And she wants to look that way, explains Patterson, for her work. A crusader for, and public face of, the disabled community, she feels it's important not to look "decrepit" or "harassed." Looking "calm" and "in control," Patterson reasons, helps her put audiences at ease and conveys a more positive image of people with disabilities. "When I'm smiling, I look pleasant"—she cracks a huge grin to illustrate—"but when I'm serious, these lines tend to make one look a little crabby. And that doesn't fit with my message."

WHEN EX-CNN legal analyst Greta Van Susteren went under the knife in January, acquiring a dramatically more glam look for her debut on FOX NEWS, much of the American public (and all of official Washington) sniggered. Jokes flew about how "FOX-y" and downright unrecognizable the new Greta is. Newspapers across the globe offered up snarky takes on Van Susteren's new look. "GRETA, BUT WHY?" was the headline of a *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial that scolded: "We would have thought—ok, hoped—that the 47-year-old Van Susteren would have had the substantive credentials and healthily wholesome looks to resist the temptation of an eye tuck and forehead squeeze." A headline in the *South China Morning Post* was just as disapproving: "JAWS DROP AND HOPES SAG AS SOBER PUNDIT GOES UNDER SURGEON'S KNIFE." Perhaps most harshly, an op-ed in *USA Today* (headlined "WHY TURN BRILLIANT LAWYER INTO BARBIE WITH BRAINS?") branded Van Susteren "a reminder of the minimalization of American women by American culture."

Plastic surgery has become one of those things—like reading the tabloids and watching The Home Shopping Network—that Americans like doing and love ridiculing others for doing. Depending on whose numbers you believe, more than seven million of us went under the knife last year. But in a Roper Starch survey conducted for the AARP, 65 percent of respondents described the "typical" cosmetic-surgery seeker as either "rich or upper class," "insecure or unhappy with themselves," or "vain or materialistic." Doctors have even developed a bag of tricks to help patients hide the ugly truth. To explain the swelling associated with an eye job, D.C. plastic surgeon Stephen Wall—the man behind Alice Patterson's forehead—tells patients to say they've had

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an allergic reaction. He advises those who wear glasses to buy new frames after surgery. "People might comment that something is different," says Wall, "but they'll usually accept that it's the glasses."

Enough already. We all know the arguments against plastic surgery: It objectifies women, feeds unrealistic images of beauty, perpetuates cultural obsession with youth, etc. As Wendy Kaminer moralized in *The American Prospect* last winter, "Cosmetic surgery is often lauded for boosting self-esteem, although it encourages people to hate themselves for being physically imperfect or looking over 45." But whether plastic surgery improves or undermines self-esteem misses the point: In cold, hard economic terms, being attractive helps you get ahead. In 1993 Daniel Hamermesh, an economics professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and Jeff Biddle, an economics professor at Michigan State, published a paper entitled "Beauty and the Labor Market," in which they calculated that "plain people" suffered a pay penalty of 5 percent to 10 percent compared with "average people," while good-looking people enjoyed a 5 percent premium. This bias (surprisingly) impacts men more than women, but unattractive women are dealt a double whammy: They're not only disadvantaged in their own careers; they are also more likely to marry men with limited earning potential. (Unfairly, ugly men don't have a problem scoring great mates.) What's more, over the course of their careers, attractive people sort themselves into the (more lucrative) specialties where good looks pay off. In a 1998 paper subtitled "Lawyers' Looks and Lucre," Hamermesh and Biddle found that not only did comely attorneys earn more as their careers progressed, but they tended to gravitate toward the private sector, where attracting clients is key to success. Their homely peers, conversely, headed for lower-paying public-sector jobs.

Our society's bias toward attractiveness is exacerbated by its cult of youth. In an (admittedly self-serving) survey conducted last year by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS), one in four employees expressed concern that their boss viewed them as less capable than younger employees. Boomers in particular are finding it painful as they crash into "the silver ceiling." Last summer *USA Today* reported that, between fiscal years 1999 and 2000, age-discrimination complaints filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission jumped from 14,000 to 16,000. Not surprisingly, doctors say they're increasingly performing botox injections and eye-lifts on hard-charging professionals worried about the young guns charging up the ladder behind them. "In any corporate culture where looking young and aggressive is important, people are using this as a way to keep themselves looking younger," says Ira Papel, a vice president of the AAFPRS. Real estate agents tend to be particularly concerned about image, he notes, as do high-tech geeks. "With anything having to do with computers," says Papel, "so many experts are so young that people in their early forties feel older and [like they need to compete] with the up-and-comers." The industry has been both lauded and criticized for its youth bias. (Just ask Intel, which has faced a half-dozen age-discrimination suits in recent years.)

Given the evidence, the most common defense of plastic surgery—that it boosts self-esteem—seems beside the point, if not downright counterproductive. Yes, plastic surgery may boost the confidence of the person seeking cosmetic surgery (and perhaps lower the confidence of those who don't and must compare themselves to their surgically enhanced peers). But by framing the argument in psychological terms, advocates implicitly concede that people seeking cosmetic surgery are vain or insecure—i.e., irrationally concerned with how they look. This defense is particularly treacherous when deployed on behalf of women, whom society is already predisposed to consider irrational. In reality, much of the enhanced self-esteem that comes with a nip or tuck may well be a by-product of the very concrete advantages that come from looking more attractive. Which is to say that plastic surgery (if you can afford it) isn't irrational at all.

To be fair, the people whose self-esteem is lowered by the

TERRY COLON

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plastic surgery of others are also being rational: Since attractiveness is relative, if the people around you look better—and thus earn more—you may be judged to look worse and, thus, earn less. But people do all kinds of things that give them an edge, some of which (starvation diets, workout mania, 80-hour workweeks) are at least as socially and physically unhealthy as cosmetic surgery. And in our hypercompetitive, hyperindividualistic society, we more often celebrate this push-yourself-to-get-ahead ethos than condemn it. Some feminists might argue that women should eschew plastic surgery because it undermines our broader fight to be judged on something other than looks. But given that feminists also remind us that women will be judged more on the way they look than will men for generations to come, it's morally dubious to insist that individual women should ignore their personal advancement (especially given that they are often competing with men) for a distant dream of collective gender equality.

Ironically, the people who may ultimately wipe away plastic surgery's lingering stigma are men. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, men now account for 14 percent of all cosmetic-surgery procedures. At present, men tend to be far more secretive about their bodywork because they fear being perceived as vain, say doctors. But when men do discuss their touch-ups, they defend them in exactly the terms that women should. "Men always say it's work-related," says Papel. In other words, the more guys have plastic surgery, the more society will view it as a rational response to the culture in which we live. Which, for better or worse, it is. ■

Lobbyists at war.

Self Service

By Franklin Foer

For Washington lobbyists, these were supposed to be the salad days. The Bush administration was to be their playground, the regulatory agencies their dolls to dress up and knock down. And on paper they've made out pretty well—tax cuts, the squashing of costly ergonomics rules, favorable appointments throughout the government. But for all their influence, D.C. lobbyists have failed to attain one elusive goal: public respect. During the 2000 primaries, John McCain denounced them as one side of the "iron triangle" of special interests that corrupt American politics. Then, as Bush took office, Jack Quinn's role in the Marc Rich pardon reminded the nation once again why it doesn't trust influence-peddlers. And finally, the Enron debacle turned everyone in Washington into an anti-corporate crusader-of-convenience. As a vote on campaign finance reform approaches, the lobbying community's old friends can't betray it fast enough.

At such a moment, you'd think lobbyists would turn to their prime professional organization, the American League of Lobbyists (ALL), for a little p.r. boost. But ALL isn't in much of a position to help: For the last three months the 600-member group has been embroiled in a vicious internecine squabble over allegations that President Jim Albertine has been misusing his ALL position to fatten his own wallet and that of a crony. The result is more than a touch comical: Washington lobbyists have begun to lobby their fellow lobbyists to remove the lobbying league president for behaving like, well, a lobbyist.

Wright Andrews, a representative of the finance industry and a past president of ALL, is the Washington lobbying community's leading moralist, its resident goo-goo. It's not an easy identity to inhabit. (For instance, prominently placed on Andrews's windowsill is a framed copy of a *Washingtonian* magazine spread that features a photo of him along with the headline "show me the money.") Oxymoronic though it may sound, Andrews considers K Street a fundamentally virtuous community whose image must not be sullied by malefactors. "There's no doubt. We need to deal with our problem cases," explains Andrews, a veteran of retired Georgia Senator Sam Nunn's office, in his charmingly thick Charlie Crocker accent. "There are some bad apples out there like there are bad priests." So Andrews has tried to do his part to clean up the profession. Last March he published a self-flagellating op-ed in *The Washington Post* endorsing the McCain-Feingold bill. "I have engaged in many activities most reformers abhor," he confessed. He also led the committee that two years ago dramatically stiffened ALL's code of professional conduct.

But his campaign for ethical lobbying escalated last December 5, after he received a mass e-mail sent by ALL President Jim Albertine. The note announced a conference about Capitol Hill security, featuring congressional leaders and police brass; registration cost $115 a head. At first the conference seemed worthy enough to Andrews. Because of new post-9/11 security restrictions, lobbyists were having a near impossible time navigating the Capitol. They traded horror stories about standing in endless lines alongside tourists and complained that favorite locales for cornering congresspersons had been cordoned off. "It's a real issue," Andrews told me.

But moments after reading Albertine's e-mail, Andrews got a call from an ALL friend: "Did you read Jim's e-mail?" "Yeah, sounds good." "No, Wright, read it again." So he did. And upon this second read, Andrews grasped the truth: Though the e-mail said the event was being "Organized by Jim Albertine, President, American League of Lobbyists," it wasn't an ALL event at all, but rather a freelance operation. Albertine, he surmised, was trading on the ALL name to make some cash. And not just for himself. At the bottom of the e-mail, Albertine announced "meeting services provided by Radnor, Inc."—a company run by Albertine's longtime friend and business partner (and another former ALL president) Ken Feltman. What made Albertine's actions still more irksome was that only a bit earlier Wade Williams

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(yet another past president of the group) had proposed that a similar event be held by ALL, and Albertine had dismissed the possibility. "I got back word," says Williams, "[that] Jim . . . wasn't interested."

In a fit of pique, Andrews fired off an angry e-mail to Albertine: "You simply can not do things like this. It's wrong and prohibited!" Along with five other past presidents, he began to compile the case against Albertine—a case they compare, without irony, to the Enron scandal. Initially, Albertine didn't dispute the facts. In conversations with the past presidents, he even handed them more rope. He admitted that he was organizing a coalition of interest groups to lobby on the security issue—a coalition that the presidents were quick to insinuate would generate lobbying fees for Albertine. A Web search uncovered still more damning evidence against Albertine: a site called *lobbyists.net*, claiming to be "a service of the American League of Lobbyists." At the top of the page, it described something called "the lobbyists network," a guide "to find a lobbyist who can help you solve your problem." It linked to Albertine and Feltman's companies—but no others.

By mid-December the past presidents had submitted a brief documenting their gripes to the ALL board—a brief that somehow later found its way into the pages of *The Washington Post*. In late January they went to present evidence to the board in person at its monthly meeting, held at the office of Albertine's newly hired lawyer. But when Andrews and the others arrived at the meeting, Albertine's lawyer informed them they were not on the list of invitees. As they sat stewing, waiting for their friends on the board to vouch for them, a receptionist emerged. She told them: Only current board members allowed. After waiting for 45 minutes, the delegation of past presidents left, humiliated. The following afternoon the humiliation was compounded when they read an e-mail from Albertine describing the meeting's outcome: Yes, the board would investigate Albertine's conflict of interest, but it would "also investigate the leaks and other dissemination of the memo from the past presidents." The board was investigating *them*. What's more, the names of the investigating committee had been suggested by Albertine himself.

And indeed, there was no shortage of things for Albertine's committee to investigate. According to Feltman, anonymous notes had showed up at the Employers Council on Flexible Compensation—a client of his and Albertine's—in envelopes without return addresses. One accused Feltman of cutting himself checks from the ALL account. Another accompanied a copy of the leaked brief: "Conflict of interest is among the most serious charges," it stated bluntly.

AFTER HEARING ANDREWS'S side of the story, two days later I visited Albertine's office. When I asked him to describe ALL's purpose, he mentioned two of its primary functions: to enhance the reputation of lobbyists by promoting high ethical standards and to provide members with networking and business-enhancing opportunities. If Andrews presents himself as the epitome of the former goal, Albertine seems to personify the latter.

Albertine and his older brother Jack run a $1 million-per-year boutique operation that has represented association executives, Fruit of the Loom, and oil pipelines. With his glasses and carefully parted hair, he looks like a smaller Trent Lott. It took mere minutes for him to rip into Andrews and the other past presidents, whom he accused of running ALL like a "circle jerk." Andrews, he said, considers himself "some sort of guru," but is really motivated by old "vendettas" (he wouldn't describe them on the record) as well as "pure and simple arrogance."

When it came to rebutting their charges, though, he was less energetic. What about *lobbyists.net*? His friend Feltman had assured him the site was a prototype—approved by the ALL board—that accidentally remained online for two years. Why didn't he let ALL sponsor the event? "People don't want to be associated with greedy lobbyists." (Not exactly the attitude one expects from a man tasked with burnishing the profession's image.) Albertine noted that he had sent out a clarification and apology for anyone who thought the event was sponsored by ALL, and he had offered to "swallow the costs and let them host the event themselves." He continued, "The conference is off. It's not going to happen. They're trying to hang me over an event that's not going to ever take place."

LISTENING TO ANDREWS and Albertine trade body blows, you might think K Street has been engulfed by controversy. But that's not quite the case. In fact, when online magazine *influenceonline.net* surveyed top lobbyists to get their impressions of the scandal, the reactions were almost universal. "I've never heard it discussed one way or another," said former South Carolina Representative Butler Derrick Jr., a partner at Powell, Goldstein, Frazer & Murphy. A senior Democratic lobbyist was even more dismissive: "A lot of [ALL's members] are probably note-takers . . . looking to be the next Bob Walker or Tommy Boggs. It's not an organization that's at all effective."

When I visited another ALL board member, he confirmed this impression. "It's like academia," he told me. "The debates are intense because the stakes aren't high." He glanced back at the door, as if to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. "Here's the truth: I wish to God I'd never got involved with these people." When I mentioned that the group seemed to include very few brand-name lobbyists, he didn't disagree. With a few exceptions, ALL's stalwarts are the anonymous working class of the lobbying profession. They toil for the Recreational Fishing Alliance and the Chemical Safety Board. They dine at the Palm but don't have their faces painted on the wall. It's not a happy combination: They get all the stigma of their profession without its gigantic paychecks. Which, in the end, may help explain both Albertine's need to push the envelope and Andrews's obsession with respect. After all, the big-time lobbyists don't need an organization to help them network. And they make enough money that they can afford not to give a damn about respectability. Or, as *National Journal* reported über-lobbyist Tommy Boggs saying at a 1998 ALL luncheon to discuss the profession's image as "hired guns": "I don't care. I just wanted to be hired." ■

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The NED v. Chinese dissidents.

Asia Minor

By JOHN BERLAU

IN JUNE 1997 the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was on the congressional chopping block, its funding zeroed out by the Senate Appropriations Committee. Created to promote democracy around the globe, the endowment seemed about to fall victim to an argument that was potent from the early 1990s through September 10, 2001: that, with the cold war over, democracy faced no serious threat.

But exiled Chinese dissident Wu Xuecan begged to differ. Testifying before a hearing on Chinese human rights abuses held by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Wu, a former editor of the Communist Party's *People's Daily*, recounted being imprisoned in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989. (Wu had published an essay in support of the demonstrators by a member of the Communist regime.) After he was released in 1993 and fled to the United States, Wu kept up the fight for democracy in his homeland. He joined a dissident think tank in Washington called the China Strategic Institute (CSI), where he edited *China Watch*, a Chinese-language, pro-democracy bimonthly newsletter aimed at intellectuals and Communist Party members and mailed into China in bulk. The institute had been receiving around $150,000 per year from the NED since the mid-'90s, and the NED's supporters pointed to it as a prime example of how the endowment brought the message of freedom to people in even the most closed societies. Less than one month after Wu testified, the full Senate voted 72-27 to restore to the NED the money the Appropriations Committee had eliminated.

Not long after he testified, however, Wu saw his own group's funding eliminated. The NED gave CSI a mere $10,000 in 1998 and nothing at all after that. In late 2000 the institute folded. The 50-year-old Wu, once an editor at the largest newspaper in China, now does janitorial work at a Catholic school in Alexandria, Virginia.

What happened in the intervening years? For one thing, in October 1997 Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the United States, and President Clinton spoke of a "constructive strategic partnership" between the two countries. Coming from a man who in 1992 attacked George H.W. Bush for kowtowing to the "butchers of Beijing" and who early in his administration tried to link trade with China to human rights, this represented a major shift in U.S. policy. Not even Richard Nixon had referred to China as a "partner." And though the NED is technically independent, Chinese dissidents and congressional critics speculate that it has been unwilling to contradict such a key pillar of American policy. There is considerable evidence, in fact, that the endowment, whose independence is supposed to allow it to promote democracy more aggressively than official U.S. policy will allow, has in recent years become little more than another way for the United States to engage the dictatorship in Beijing. In so doing, the NED has abandoned dissidents like Wu and the very mandate that justifies its existence.

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ESTABLISHED BY CONGRESS in 1983 at the Reagan administration's behest, the NED was set up as a private nonprofit with an independent board of directors and president. The goal was to fund resistance movements in Communist dictatorships in ways the U.S. government itself could not. The NED (which can seek private contributions, but according to its 2000 annual report still gets more than 99 percent of its funding from Congress) supported Solidarity in Poland and Violeta Chamorro's opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, in Nicaragua. While the Reagan administration weakened communism through military buildups and targeted economic sanctions, the NED ensured that pro-democracy groups remained financially stable even as their countries' economies collapsed. Not confining itself to anti-Communist movements, the NED also funded opposition to military dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile in the late 1980s.

But when the cold war ended, lawmakers on both the left and the right suggested that the NED had outlived its usefulness. And throughout the '90s budget hawks tried to abolish it. In 1993 Representative Paul Kanjorski, a Pennsylvania Democrat, asked in a "Dear Colleague" letter: "Now that the Berlin Wall has fallen and democracy has taken hold throughout the globe, is NED still necessary?" His measure to cut off the NED's funding passed the House of Representatives before being quashed in the Senate. The next year Representative Joel Hefley, a Colorado Republican, revived the issue. "The Cold War is over," he wrote in a letter to his colleagues. "Our deficit lives on."

But the NED beat back these efforts—in part because of its record in China. "The NED has been able to support strong and influential work by Chinese activists, even while they operate under severe constraints," Louisa Coan Greve, the NED's senior program officer for Asia, told the House International Relations Committee in 1999. In fact, the legislation granting China permanent normal trade relations in 2000 explicitly included a promise of additional funds for the NED to help Chinese dissidents. Two staunch critics of the Chinese regime, Virginia Republican Frank Wolf and California Democrat Nancy Pelosi, sit on the House Appropriations subcommittees responsible for the endowment's funding. And they have repeatedly pointed to its work on China as evidence of its enduring relevance.

Ironically, however, even as members of Congress like Wolf and Pelosi have celebrated the NED's work, in recent years the endowment's commitment to the most aggressive anti-Beijing activists has begun to evaporate. In her 1999 testimony before Congress, for instance, Greve mentioned Chinese VIP Reference, which she called one of "the best-known independent news-service operations" in China. Run by a Tiananmen Square demonstrator who fled to the United

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States and changed his name to Richard Long, VIP Reference has funneled criticism of the Chinese government into China despite Beijing's best efforts. Long "spams" news reports into China in such a way that recipients can claim ignorance of their origin. A few people caught reading and distributing Long's e-mails have been arrested, but hundreds of thousands more have received them undetected.

In front of Congress, Greve held up VIP Reference as the kind of valuable work the NED funds in China. And in its 1998 annual report, the NED claims it gave the group $40,000. But in fact, Greve acknowledges that VIP Reference never received a dime. Greve says the NED closed VIP Reference's grant because Long didn't come up with the necessary documentation in time. "We extended the grant," she said. "We gave him fifteen months, and he never came through with any of the paperwork, and so we had to close the grant." Greve claims that the NED tried to help Long with the paperwork and warned him that the grant was about to expire. "Through in-person meetings, written letters, faxes, and e-mails, [the NED] tried to help him to fill out the paperwork that's necessary."

But Long says he received no warning that the grant was about to expire and believes the NED deliberately created bureaucratic hurdles to keep him from getting funded. "My understanding was that she was trying to make the situation hard for us, so that we couldn't use the money," he says. Perhaps more importantly, Long says the NED pushed him to use much of the grant not to reach China through the Internet, but to hold conferences and print monographs for American audiences. (Greve strongly denies this.) Long also says he applied again, in 2000 and 2001, and had his grant requests rejected (Greve maintains he has never applied again).

Wei Jingsheng's experience is similar. The father of the Chinese Democracy movement, he was imprisoned for nearly 20 years after he posted his 1978 essay "The Fifth Modernization: Democracy" on a wall in Beijing. In 1998, after China released Wei on "medical parole" and he came to the United States, the NED held a banquet in his honor. There it presented him its annual Democracy Award, which came with a check for $16,000. But since then, the NED has rejected every grant application Wei has presented. "More than three years have passed, and I never received a penny from NED," Wei says. The rejected proposals, some of which Wei is now funding himself from lecture fees, include educating workers in independent Chinese unions, providing humanitarian assistance to the families of political prisoners, and strengthening publications not supported by the Chinese government. Like Long and Wu, Wei thinks the reason is that the NED fears offending the Chinese government. Greve declined comment on why Wei's requests have been rejected and did not get into specifics about the proposal from Wu's group. "It's just very difficult for us to comment on why specific proposals may not get funding," she said.

Other dissidents in exile who participate in a coalition called the Free China Movement also say they were strung along when they applied for grants and, after requests for revisions in their proposals, were ultimately turned down. Shengde Lian, a student leader of the Tiananmen protests who fled to the United States three years after Chinese authorities released him from jail in 1991, wanted to help the underground China Democratic Party organize Chinese laborers into a nonviolent movement reminiscent of Solidarity in Poland. But while the NED assisted Solidarity, Lian says that in China the endowment hasn't supported effective nonviolent methods to topple a repressive Communist regime. (Greve again declined comment.)

IT'S TRUE, OF course, that with $2.4 million allocated for programs in China in fiscal year 2001, the NED cannot fund all deserving groups. But there is reason to believe that Wei, Long, and Wu failed to receive grants for reasons other than a mere shortage of resources. A glance at the NED's annual reports from 1998 onward reveals that the endowment favors markedly different programs in China from those it supports in other repressive countries. While money for projects in Fidel Castro's Cuba and Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia went almost exclusively to democratic anti-government activists, the NED's most recent annual report, covering fiscal year 2000, shows that more than 60 percent of the NED's China funding goes, in the NED's words, "to implement programs in China in line with official Chinese reform policies."

In fact, the NED's biggest project in China is observance of the Beijing government's so-called village-level elections. In 2000 the NED gave the International Republican Institute more than $1 million to monitor and offer technical advice on elections for Chinese village committees. Greve defends the funding as "helping to institutionalize familiarity with and experience with certain procedures which taken together will be important for people to continue to use when there is a further opening of the system." But as TNR's Lawrence F. Kaplan has pointed out (See "Trade Barrier," July 9, 2001), the elections hardly institutionalize a familiarity with democracy, since the Chinese Communist Party carefully screens candidates and generally uses the elections to tighten its control over the countryside.

In fact, assisting in government-sponsored "reforms" like the village elections is exactly what the NED is *not* supposed to be doing. On the endowment's website, David Lowe, the NED's director of government and external relations, defines the organization's mandate this way: "As a nongovernmental organization, it could provide political assistance to democratic forces in repressive or other sensitive political situations where U.S. government support ... would be diplomatically or politically unfeasible." But the NED's biggest project in China could easily be carried out by the State Department. "[U.S.] Embassy officials could observe these village-level elections," said a Senate Republican staffer well versed in China policy and in the NED's organizational structure. "If State chose to do so, they could do it through international organizations. That is not cutting edge. NED for whatever reasons has chosen not to engage itself in more aggressive democracy-promotion programs in China."

Why has the NED gone soft on China? Wu believes CSI lost its funding because it was too critical of the government in Beijing, and contradicted the State Department and Clinton administration's pro-engagement line. "Maybe they were not very satisfied with our die-hard anti-Communist attitude,"

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Wu said through a translator in an interview last summer. "The NED likes people with a soft attitude to the Chinese regime." Lian agrees. "I believe NED under its current real policy and practice does not support the real democratic forces," he says. "They just want to maintain the status quo."

Greve admits that "[a] lot of people don't do dissident programs because they would get kicked out of China." She insists, however, that this fear hasn't stopped the NED from funding critics of the regime, including two veteran exile groups, Harry Wu's Laogai Research Foundation and Human Rights in China. But both these groups, while doing valuable work, do not pose as great a threat to the Chinese regime as many of the newer dissident organizations. Human Rights in China offers legal assistance to human rights victims and documents human rights abuses, but it steers clear of advocating democracy. And in a move that infuriated other dissident groups, it remained neutral on whether Beijing should host the 2008 Olympics. Harry Wu, a prisoner in a *laogai*—a Chinese gulag—during the Cultural Revolution, educates the West about the ongoing horrors of the *laogai* system. But most of his work does not penetrate into China. And there is reason to believe that in the coming years even these few remaining dissident programs might see their funding disappear. In early 2001 Anne Thurston, an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies who was commissioned by the NED to review its China programs, advised the endowment in an internal memorandum to "begin planning a phaseout of some exile-based programs." Such projects, she warned, "have implications for American policy toward China." Thurston warned against destabilizing China, citing a statement from Kenneth Lieberthal, President Clinton's China adviser on the National Security Council: "There is, in sum, as great a 'threat' to U.S. interests from a weak and unstable China as there is from a strong and antagonistic China." Instead, Thurston urged the NED to continue its work with the Chinese government on projects like the village-level elections. The endowment, she argued in her review of China programs in late 1999, should work with "reformers" in the Chinese government who are "promoting slow, incremental, cumulative change" and are "more concerned with day-to-day practical issues ... than with the distant abstractions of democracy and human rights." Programs like the NED's village-elections project "have a multiplier effect," she wrote, "as those trained with NED-funded programs fan out to train others, thus reaching more deeply into Chinese society."

Yet Thurston's "multiplier effect" didn't work all that well in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11. While twelve years ago Chinese students built a replica of the Statue of Liberty, now many are cheering on America's attackers. According to *The Washington Post*, "anti-American screeds have won hands down" on Internet bulletin boards at Beijing University. "I'm happy because I hate America," one student wrote. "We've been bullied by America for too long!" stated another message. "Finally, someone helped us to vent a little." And according to London's *Sunday Telegraph*, "The Chinese state-run propaganda machine is cashing in on the terror attacks in New York and Washington, producing books, films and video games glorifying the strikes as a humbling blow against an arrogant nation."

Meanwhile, dissident groups are withering on the vine. Many funders are willing to finance projects in collaboration with the Chinese government—the Ford Foundation, AT&T, and Chase Manhattan all support village-election projects—but few are willing to irk Beijing by supporting pro-democracy exiles. Massaging a bandage on his left hand, which he sprained moving furniture at his janitorial job, Wu Xuecan reflected last year: "I believe that a human being should have a backbone, should be steadfast in his beliefs.... I would rather do labor [than] change my political attitude on China for grants from the NED." Unfortunately, given the NED's own political attitude on China, Wu is likely to be moving furniture for a long time. ■

How the Army ditched the Powell Doctrine.

Troop Movement

By LAWRENCE F. KAPLAN

LAST WEEK, IN the middle of the Battle of Gardez, theater commander Army General Tommy Franks expressed his condolences to the families of American soldiers who lost their lives "in our ongoing operations in Vietnam." It was a strange slip. In truth, recent ground operations in Afghanistan have had exactly the opposite resonance: Never in the past 30 years has the specter of Vietnam been further from the minds of American military planners. The involvement of sizable numbers of conventional Army forces in sustained combat is a remarkable development in itself, one not seen since the Gulf war. More remarkable still was the sheer audacity of the effort—which involved helicopters operating at maximum altitudes; regular Army forces from the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne divisions battling Al Qaeda fighters at close range; and Army commanders improvising as they went along. The officers who planned the operation at Gardez weren't reliving Vietnam. They were banishing it.

From its inception, Operation Anaconda was very much an Army product. The initial plan for rooting out Al Qaeda

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and Taliban forces that had regrouped in the caves of eastern Afghanistan was drafted by General Franklin Hagenbeck of the Army's 10th Mountain Division. From there it was passed up to Central Command's land component commander, Army Lieutenant General Paul Mikolashek, before landing on Franks's desk. The decision to rely heavily on regular Army forces has stirred considerable speculation. An article last week in *The Washington Times* provoked an uproar at the Pentagon by quoting an accusation (from what sounded like an Air Force officer) that an "Army mafia" was pressing for the use of conventional forces on parochial grounds. That is, having sat out every American combat action since Somalia (including most of the war in Afghanistan), the Army felt it couldn't afford to sit out another.

That's not quite right. In fact, the original request for the plan came from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, after intelligence indicated an Al Qaeda buildup back in January—only one month after Tora Bora, where America's reliance on Afghan proxies allowed much of the enemy to escape. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Air Force General Richard Myers flew all the way to Afghanistan to review the plan, and the president himself approved it. Still, the allegation contained a kernel of truth: Army leaders did want their troops in the fight. And, given the Army's institutional trajectory over the past decade, that itself is news. Good news.

AFP/POOL PHOTO BY WARREN ZINN/ARMY TIMES

THE ARMY'S EAGERNESS to play a role in Afghanistan derives, in part, from the reality of a war being fought in self-defense. But it also reflects the accumulation of past experiences. First, of course, there was Vietnam. The "lessons of Vietnam" usually conjure up a reflexive opposition to military intervention on the part of *civilian* policymakers. But nowhere was the Vietnam syndrome felt more deeply than among the post-Vietnam officer corps, particularly in the Army, which bled the most in Southeast Asia. The understandable reluctance to repeat the experience yielded, among other things, the restrictive doctrine for the use of force popularized by Colin Powell, the most powerful Army general of the post-Vietnam era. Many would later invoke the Powell Doctrine's strict "national interest" criteria to explain the Army's reluctance to intervene in places like Bosnia and Kosovo. But it's worth remembering that Powell argued that the defense of Kuwait didn't meet the criteria either.

After the first President Bush launched the war nonetheless, he declared that the United States had finally "licked the Vietnam syndrome." But, for senior Army officials, America's liberation of Kuwait only reinforced it. Operation Desert Storm, which was designed to minimize the risk to U.S. ground troops, set a nearly impossible standard for an already cautious Army leadership. As a result, recalls author and retired Army Colonel Ralph Peters, "After Desert Storm, Army generals carried force protection [i.e., safeguarding one's own troops] to extremes." And when they failed to meet the Gulf war standard two years later in Somalia, where the loss of 18 American soldiers elicited a public outcry and prompted President Clinton to abandon the mission, the Army brass grew even more risk-averse. Indeed, Clinton's preoccupation with casualties only encouraged an existing ethos that equated them with failure.

It surfaced again during the mid-1990s when Army generals argued against putting troops on the ground in Bosnia. When U.S. troops finally did set foot in the Balkans in 1995, the Army kept them on a short leash, openly declaring that their primary mission was force protection. Not surprisingly, a massive survey conduced by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies during Clinton's second term (the results of which will be included in a forthcoming book by Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi) found that military officers were far more casualty-averse than their civilian counterparts; that senior officers were more casualty-averse than junior officers; and that senior Army officers were among the most casualty-averse of all.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Kosovo. When President Clinton declared: "I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war," Army leaders proved eager to oblige—even after his resistance to the idea softened. The most memorable example came when Army Chief of Staff Dennis Reimer opposed General Wesley Clark's request to employ Apache helicopter gunships against Serb forces. According to *The Washington Post*, Reimer "worried that the Army's Apaches would be a step toward the use of ground forces, something the Army leadership did not favor." And indeed, when Clinton ultimately authorized the dispatch of 24 Apaches to Albania, the Army dragged its feet—taking one month to deliver them, and then only in the company of more than 5,000 Army personnel, 15 tanks, a mechanized infantry company, an engineer company, and an air-defense battery. None were ever used. The saga embarrassed the United States and humiliated the Army. Of his service's performance in Kosovo, then-Army Secretary Louis Caldera remarked, "We seem to be more willing to suffer casualties in training than in real operations."

The Army's marginal role in Kosovo proved to be, if not a

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turning point, at least an opening for institutional self-criticism. The problem in Kosovo was not a lack of capability but, as retired Colonel Richard Hart Sinnreich put it recently in *Army* magazine, "the mental processes of some of its senior leaders." Adds former Army officer and Boston University Professor Andrew Bacevich, "Among the more perceptive leaders of the officer corps, it was becoming evident as early as Bosnia that having an Army unwilling to take risks is pointless." The Kosovo embarrassment brought these fights into the open, spurring a serious debate in the Pentagon about whether the Army was even relevant anymore.

With this debate came an opportunity to revisit Army doctrine. Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki (who replaced Reimer in 1999), along with his deputy, General John Keane, seized upon the Army's failure in Kosovo to unveil a plan to transport Army forces to combat theaters within 96 hours and to begin the process of transforming heavy armor units into lighter brigades. "When ordered," Shinseki says, "we intend to get to trouble spots faster than our adversaries can complicate the crisis." Pointing to the vulnerability of these lighter brigades, critics within the Army have derided Shinseki's vision as a recipe for significant casualties—an argument bolstered by recent Army war games. But while the plan's particulars may be subject to debate, the rationale behind it is not. Army leaders, after all, are now talking openly about the imperative of getting to war zones rather than staying out of them. "Soldiers from rapid deployment units tend to be risk-takers and aggressive," says Robert Killebrew, a former Army colonel and one of its most innovative thinkers. "And as the Army moves toward a lighter, more mobile structure, it will begin to look and think the same way."

September 11, then, may have been what Peters calls an "accelerator" for a process that was already underway, with many Army leaders having openly acknowledged that putting troops on the ground only as a last resort and then subordinating their mission to force protection undercut the Army's own mission. But Franks, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and a career artillery officer, wasn't one such leader. Consequently, the evolution of the Army's involvement in Afghanistan over the past five months has closely mirrored the evolution of Army thinking over the past five years—from excessive caution, to embarrassment, to a more robust stance.

According to officers at Central Command and on the Army Staff—as well as civilian policymakers—Franks's early stewardship of the war was characterized by tentativeness. Among other things, he initially proposed a days-long air campaign confined to the suppression of Taliban air defenses; declined for weeks to use the JSTARS surveillance aircraft (an essential tool in the U.S. arsenal that illuminates enemy activity over a wide area on radar); sought legal counsel before targeting Taliban leader Mullah Omar (who escaped in the meantime); and his team turned down a request for air support from imperiled opposition leader Abdul Haq (who was quickly captured and killed). During the first months of the war, instances of excessive caution like these regularly became the centerpiece of twice-daily telephone conversations between Rumsfeld, Myers, and Franks—during which Rumsfeld often had to prod Franks to be more aggressive. And when Franks chose to deploy Marines to landlocked Afghanistan ahead of the Army, senior members of his own service began to echo Rumsfeld's concerns.

No operation provoked more second-guessing than the December assault on Tora Bora, where Franks relied on a combination of Afghan proxies and small numbers of Special Operations Forces. The mix wasn't right. The Afghan troops, whose aims no longer coincided with our own, proved less eager to comb the caves of Tora Bora than they were to smuggle Al Qaeda members across the border. The operation embarrassed everyone involved: Central Command, which devised it; Rumsfeld's team, which endorsed it; and the Army, which could have played a valuable role but, aside from fielding Special Forces teams, played none.

Nonetheless, the Bush team's unflinching support for the war effort has emboldened ground forces. Hence, while the initiative for putting Army troops into Gardez came from Rumsfeld, Army sources say Franks adapted quickly to the new strategy as well as to the surprises and last-minute tactical imperatives of the battle itself. As the war in Afghanistan extends into its fifth month, the Army's institutional reflexes are rapidly yielding to operational requirements. But the Army's performance also reflects a gradual erosion of the old verities. "The idea that some element of risk-taking is a punishable offense has been losing stock for years," says one mid-level officer. "The aggressiveness you see in [Gardez] is a symptom of that." Indeed, critics may fault the Army for its tactics in Gardez, but they can hardly accuse it of avoiding risks. And in the end, that may prove more even significant than the outcome of the operation itself. "There probably never should have been a debate about putting forces on the ground [in Afghanistan]," says Mackubin Thomas Owens, a professor of strategy at the Naval War College, "but if there was, Gardez has put it to rest." Hopefully forever. ■

PHOTO BY JOE RAEDLE/GETTYIMAGES

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Killing Fields

IT'S BACK. NOT that it is ever absent for long, but the present instance is particularly irritating. Here again is the oxymoron—the picture that combines strong execution and a poor screenplay. In this case the screenplay is not merely poor, it is dreadful, but it is more ostentatiously so because the other components are so fine.

Harrison's Flowers (Universal Focus) is a French-financed venture with a French director and with American and British actors in the principal roles. Its subject is the Serbian butchery of Croatians in Vukovar in 1991, and if there can be any doubt left about the Serbs' scorched-earth policy—a scorched-household policy, really—this film does its literal damnedest to sweep them away. (Was the film's release timed with the opening of the Milosevic trial?) To put it otherwise, the slaughter scenes—they cannot accurately be called battle scenes—made me feel as if I were constantly being slapped across the face with cold steel.

War correspondents have recognized the verity of the slaughter in *Harrison's Flowers* but are miffed that, like past films about correspondents, it bumbles the details of their profession. Correspondents need not feel so proprietary: physicians, lawyers, architects, business executives, and many others have all been miffed at films that get everything right except their jobs. *Harrison's Flowers* is so powerful in its strengths that we simply wait for its (plentiful) weak moments to finish and get out of the way.

Elie Chouraqui directed and co-wrote the screenplay, so he is inescapably responsible for what stuns and what flounders. Chouraqui entered films in 1978 at the age of twenty-four; he has worked on numerous films but has made relatively few of his own. In this picture, every element of its environment rings with metallic truth; it has force and impetus and a use of close-ups that, for a change, is needed and enlightening. But everything in the story itself is so pulpy that an old question nags. How could the same man be responsible for both the picture's ruthlessness and its slop? The question is doubtlessly naïve, but it persists.

Harrison is a *Newsweek* photographer. He lives in New Jersey with his wife, Sarah, and their children, and the hothouse that gives the film its symbolic title. He has done a lot of war reportage, and he insists on another tour of duty in Bosnia. Word soon comes back that he has been killed, but Sarah refuses to believe that he is dead. Why does she disbelieve it? Because, you doubters out there, *a wife knows*. She puts her children in a relative's care and goes over to find her husband, somewhere in Bosnia. All kinds of questions are not answered, but the story is too ludicrous to mock. Well, a little mockery: everything turns out OK because *a wife knows*.

Still, not only is the war stuff authentic, but some of the performances are amazingly good. It is amazing that Andie MacDowell found the means in herself to make Sarah more than a mobile magazine illustration. The same amazement arises with David Strathairn as Harrison and Brendan Gleeson as a seasoned colleague. An exception is Adrien Brody, as a younger colleague, who brings Method clichés to the battlefield.

Besides the Bosnian horror, some of the scenes at home are well handled. When her husband is overseas, Sarah goes to see his boss. This sequence, from the moment that she steps out of the elevator, is acute. People avoid her eyes and do not return her greetings, so that by the time she reaches the boss's office, she knows that there is bad news about her husband. Such directing belongs in a better picture. As does the cinematography of Nicola Pecorini, which is composed of the almost tangible textures of everything in a shot, and the editing of sound by Guillaume Sciama, which puts our ears in Bosnia.

Something spooky haunts **We Were Soldiers** (Paramount). The planning for this Vietnam picture must have begun at least two years ago; yet, spookily, it fits perfectly the spirit of the moment—in a country that is at war but, because of the odd nature of that war, needs reminders of the fact. Of course there are almost always war films in the works, some of them about Vietnam; but most Vietnam films have been skeptical—*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, *Hamburger Hill*, and others. *We Were Soldiers*, though not a gung-ho jamboree of grown-up Boy Scouts who suffer a few Band-Aid scratches, is certainly not skeptical. It is about the camaraderie of troops bound for Vietnam who, as their leader warns, have one another and nothing but one another when they fall into hell.

Mel Gibson plays Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, the real-life co-author of the book on which the screenplay is based. The director, Randall Wallace, made his own adaptation. In 1965, Moore takes his men through their training; before they embark, he promises them that he will be the first man to step out of a helicopter and the last man to leave. He keeps this promise, though we do not know how he could have been sure of the second part. He then leads his men into action at Ia Drang, a fierce engagement that lasts three days. The bombs, the shells, the automatic fire, the bayoneting, are all justly frightening. Whatever one's view of the Vietnam War, it would be brutal and stupid to discount the suffering of those who were there. (My own view is that fifty-eight thousand Americans and numberless others were ground pointlessly out of existence.)

We Were Soldiers appreciates those who fought. But it interlards the battle sequences with Movieland cream filling of the wives back home. Though some of the wives get the worst possible news, these homefront sequences are tritely written and cast. Hollywood interrupts the battle.

Another sort of interruption is helpful, if ironic. Some scenes are set in the enemy's underground headquarters, but they do not feature drooling Asian villains. We see a calm, intelligent commander who leads committed, patriotic troops. This very equity works against the picture finally because it makes us wonder yet again why the Americans were there. We never learn what this Ia Drang foray was supposed to accomplish; it is just plunged into, like an exercise with real bullets and napalm and piles of bodies.

Wallace directed with a shrewdness that keeps the various shafts of action reasonably clear, and his colleagues, with cameras and technical effects, contrived wide-screen immersions. As the commander, Gibson is not quite reassuring in the John Wayne style. (This commander could have been killed: Wayne never.) But the real point of the picture is pronounced: it assures us that military service, though it

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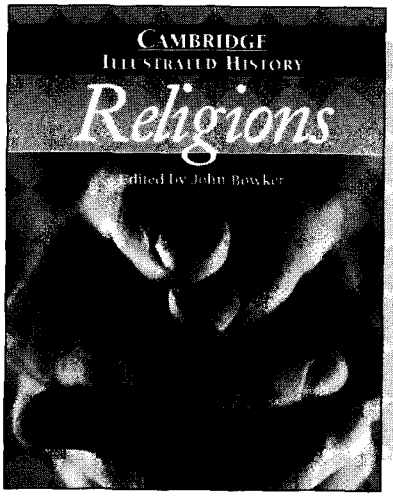

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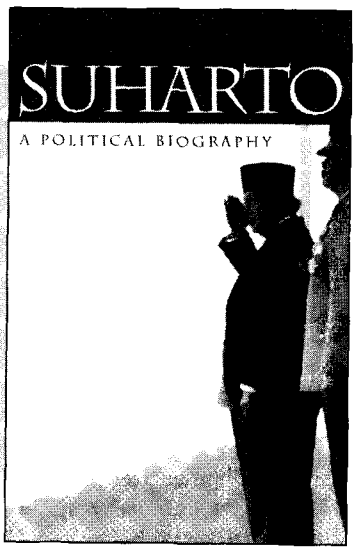

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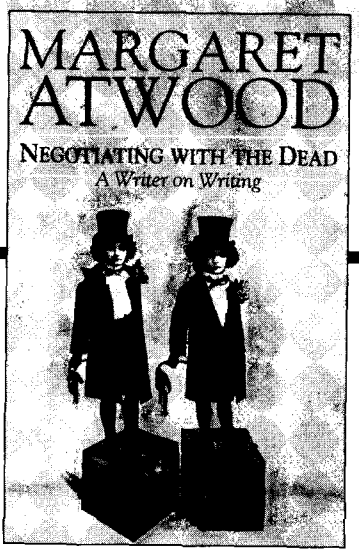

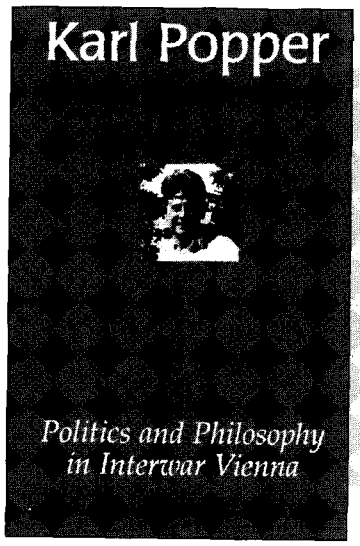

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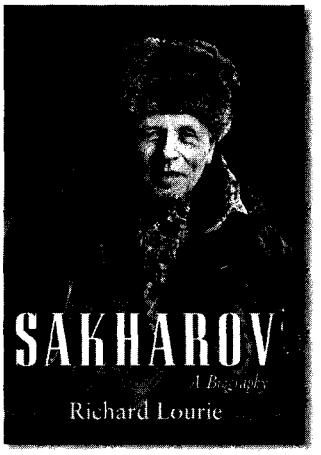

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The Trick of Truth

By JAMES WOOD

Atonement
by Ian McEwan

(Doubleday, 400 pp., $26)

IAN MCEWAN IS one of the most gifted literary storytellers alive—where storytelling means kinesis, momentum, prowl, suspense, charge. His paragraphs are mined with menace. He is a master of the undetonated bomb and the slow-acting detail: the fizzing fact that slowly dissolves throughout a novel and perturbs everything in its wake, the apparently buried secret that will not stay dead and must have its vampiric midnight. These talents, which are enabled by a penetrating intelligence and a prose style far richer and more flexible than most contemporary writers dream of, have made McEwan an anomalous figure in Britain: perhaps the only truly literary best-selling novelist in that country.

The cost has been high, however. McEwan's work is very controlled, but its reality is somewhat stifled. More often than not, one emerges from his stories as if from a vault, happy to breathe a more accidental air. In his careful, excessively managed universes, in which everything is made to fit together, the reader is offered many of the true pleasures of fiction, but sometimes starved of the truest difficulties. McEwan's fictions have been prodigies: they do everything but move us. In his world what is most important is our secrets, not our mysteries.

In other words, McEwan's fiction has sometimes felt artificial. It should be said, in his favor, that most contemporary novelists feel artificial because they are not competent enough to tell a convincing or interesting story; it is a peculiar excess of proficiency and talent, like McEwan's—or like Robert Stone's, W. Somerset Maugham's, or Graham Greene's—that produces a fiction so competently told that it also feels artificial. Still, one has tended to read McEwan with the sense that he is beautifully constructing and managing various hypothetical situations rather than freely following and grasping at a great truth. (That this latter mode is also an artifice is only a banal paradox.) In particular, McEwan's characters, while never less than interesting, lively, and sometimes interestingly weird, have tended not to be quite human. Many of them have neither pasts nor futures, but are frozen in the threatening present. Many of them have parents who died when they were young. They rarely refer to their childhoods, and seem not to have the use of deep memory as such. McEwan, unlike most writers, has not seemed to need any kitty of childhood detail on which to draw. This absence of past stories, of loitering retrospect, allows him to polish the clean lines of his stories. Since his writing rarely dips into the reflective past, it can exist the better as pure novelty. This is the key to McEwan's extraordinary narrative stealth. His fictions, like detective stories, are always moving forward. They seem to shed their sentences rather than to accumulate them.

Atonement, perhaps following the claim of its title, is a radical break with this earlier McEwan, and it is certainly his finest and most complex novel. It represents a new era in McEwan's work, and this revolution is achieved in two interesting ways. First, McEwan has loosened the golden ropes that have made his fiction feel so impressively imprisoned. His new book is larger and more ample than anything he has done before, and moves from an English country house in 1935 to an extraordinary description of the British army's retreat at Dunkirk and a chapter set in wartime London. And second, McEwan uses his new novel to comment on precisely the kind of fiction that he himself has tended to produce in the past. It may be going too far to see *Atonement* as a kind of atonement for fiction's untruths—not least because *Atonement* is ultimately, I think, a defense of fiction's untruths. But it is certainly a novel explic-

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itly troubled by fiction's fictionality—its artificiality—and eager to explore the question of the novel's responsibility to truth.

Of course, confessing to a sin is not the same as abstaining from it, and *Atonement* might easily have been no more than an over-controlled novel that sought to apologize for being over-controlled. But from the beginning the book has a spaciousness that is new in this writer. Significantly, *Atonement* is chiefly about a child, a little girl named Briony Tallis. The novel opens in 1935; she lives in a large country house in Surrey. Her elder sister, Cecilia, has just come down from Girton College, Cambridge. Her mother, who is subject to migraines, spends much of the time lying in her bedroom. Her father, a civil servant, is a distant presence, usually away in London. Around the house, in addition to the usual staff, is a young man named Robbie Turner, who has also just come down from Cambridge. Robbie's status is ambiguous: he is the son of the Tallis family's cleaning lady, and lives with his mother in a nearby cottage, but as a child he was taken under the family's wing, and his education was paid for by them. He practically grew up with Cecilia, who is in love with him. Alas for Robbie, young Briony, who is thirteen years old, is also in love with him, and Briony will ultimately take her revenge on him, the revenge of the child who feels tempted by, but still exiled from, adulthood.

The novel opens as a house party is about to begin. Briony's elder brother Leon and his friend Paul Marshall are coming from London. Briony's young cousins Pierrot, Jackson, and Lola Quincey have just arrived. Briony has always dreamed of writing, and she is eager for her three cousins to act the parts of her new verse play, *The Trials of Arabella*. *Mansfield Park*, with its staged play in a country house, and its reflection on the dangerous excesses of the theater, is an obvious progenitor. McEwan has an epigraph from *Northanger Abbey*, and he clearly wants to perform that most difficult literary task, the simultaneous creation of a reality that satisfies as a reality while signaling itself as a fiction. The characters, for instance, have obviously theatrical and outlandish names (Pierrot, Lola, Leon, Briony), which are simply incompatible with verisimilitude.

One of the ways in which McEwan does endow this fictive world with a reality is by genuinely interesting himself in the ambitions and the follies of a little girl. Briony Tallis, a prim, yearning, intelligent child with a rage for order and a tendency to judge before comprehending, is one of the novel's achievements. McEwan is funny about Briony's pretentious habit of stealing complicated words from the dictionary, so that her verse melodrama, *The Trials of Arabella*, opens thus:

> This is the tale of spontaneous Arabella
> Who ran off with an extrinsic fellow.
> It grieved her parents to see their
> first born
> Evanesce from her home to go to
> Eastbourne
> Without permission . . .

We follow Briony's furies and daydreams, as her plans for the staging of her play are slowly thwarted (as in *Mansfield Park*, the play is never successfully performed). McEwan is especially acute in his conjuring of the aimlessness and solitude of childhood. In one typical scene, we watch Briony as she sits and plays with her hands:

> She raised one hand and flexed its fingers and wondered, as she had sometimes before, how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command. Or did it have some little life of its own? She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instance before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect. It was like a wave breaking. If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge. She brought her forefinger closer to her face and stared at it, urging it to move. It remained still because she was pretending, she was not entirely serious, and because willing it to move, or being about to move it, was not the same as actually moving it. And when she did crook it finally, the action seemed to start in the finger itself, not in some part of her mind. When did it know to move, when did she know to move it?

From here, Briony goes on to consider her own sense of reality: "was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face?" If the answer is yes, Briony thinks, then "the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts

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striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was." But if the answer is no, she thinks, then Briony "was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had."

So we follow the vain drift of a child's logic over a page. A universal experience is evoked, and McEwan subtly makes the banal and childish dilemma—when do I control my fingers?—the spur to those larger frustrations of childhood, the questions of authority, agency, importance. What child has not selfishly thought: is anyone else as real as I am? And McEwan traces this mental discussion with an exemplary tact, the language having the poise and the exactitude of the adult novelist while inhabiting the imperfect simplicity of the child ("the bright and private *inside* feeling she had").

Lovelife—The Home Stretch

An olive branch, both given and apologised for
in the same breath. Like the gift of sécateurs
that will come to weigh upon the gardening gloves,

freckled with damp, between the French doors
and a row of annuals, until the Grundig runs down,
the day thickens, and a lamp in the living room flicks on.

Conor O'Callaghan

BRIONY IS ABOUT to discover that her sister Cecilia does indeed feel as "valuable to herself" as Briony does. Or, rather, Briony is about to ignore this truth, in a moment for which the rest of her life will be an atonement. Staring out of the window, she sees Cecilia and Robbie standing by the large fountain. Suddenly, Cecilia strips down to her underwear while Robbie watches her, and steps into the deep fountain to retrieve something. Cecilia emerges, puts her clothes back on, picks up a vase of flowers that had been hidden by the fountain, and walks into the house. Robbie also walks away. The scene stirs the little girl, who had once confessed her love to Robbie. She has the sense that she has witnessed some adult mystery, perhaps a scene of obscure erotic domination. Briony does not know what McEwan has told us, namely that Cecilia dipped into the fountain to retrieve a piece of the broken vase, and that Cecilia's provocative stripping had more to do with erotic challenge than submission or fear.

Briony is aware that her dim comprehension of what she has witnessed burdens her with an obligation not to race to judgment. Indeed, after her witnessing, she decides to abandon melodrama (which has been her habitual literary genre) and begin the more difficult task of writing truthfully and impartially. She could write the scene from three different perspectives, she excitedly realizes,

> from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive.... And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.

Six decades later, McEwan tells us, when Briony Tallis is a celebrated author of fiction "known for its amorality," she will recall this year, in newspaper interviews, as a turning point in her literary development.

BUT IN FACT Briony ignores her own caveats, and vandalizes the wise perspectivism that she claims to have discovered. Over the next few hours, the idea that Robbie is an erotic menace, an outsider or even a predator, grows in Briony's mind. She interrupts Robbie and Cecilia having hurried sex in the library, and again infers from their position that Robbie is forcing Cecilia into something unpleasant. (McEwan tells us that actually the lovers were equally sexually inexperienced and mutually attracted.) When, later that night, Briony's fifteen-year-old cousin Lola is sexually attacked in the garden, Briony assumes that the shape she saw in the darkness, running away, was Robbie. (Lola was attacked from behind, and seems unable to identify her molester.) Briony tells the police that she is sure that she saw Robbie, and she has other information too, all of it damning to Robbie's case.

Her determination to accuse Robbie is bound up with her literary impulses. She needs to make a story of it:

> Surely it was not too childish to say there had to be a story; and this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil. But wasn't she—that was, Briony the writer—supposed to be so worldly now as to be above such nursery tale ideas as good and evil? There must be some lofty, god-like place from which all people could be judged alike, not pitted against each other.... If such a place existed, she was not worthy of it. She could never forgive Robbie his disgusting mind.

In part, Briony has been unable to shed her old melodramatic impulses, and is merely showing her age, even as she strives to get beyond it. But in part what is at work in her is the excitement of shaping a story that fits, that makes too much sense. McEwan surely wants us to reflect on the dangerous complicities of fiction, not just of melodrama but of form itself, which insists on sealing and plotting. What Briony saw was in truth plotless, because it could not be made to mean. Yet a plot is exactly what she imposes. Fiction, even very good fiction, often tends to notarize the incomprehensible simply because it insists on its readability. This is exactly the kind of fiction that McEwan has tended to produce in recent years; his last two novels, *Enduring Love* and *Amsterdam*, both begin with mysteries that they then efficiently lay bare. Formally and stylistically, both begin novelistically and accelerate into the neat, jigsawed domain of the thriller. *Atonement*, by contrast, seems to want to ponder the deformation of tidiness in such fiction, and to propose instead an enriching confusion. McEwan, as Chesterton has it, chooses reality's battered truth over form's perfected error.

THE PARADOX, OF course, is that it is only through fiction itself that we can see how mistaken Briony is. McEwan's own wise perspectivism enables us to inhabit that "lofty, god-like place from which all people could be judged alike." Thanks to his own novel, we discover how terribly Briony misjudged the moment in front of the fountain. Thus *Atonement* is both a criticism of fiction and a defense of fiction; a criticism of its shaping and exclusive torque, and a defense of its ideal democratic generosity to all. A criticism of fiction's misuse; and a defense of an ideal. And this doubleness, of apologia and celebration, could not be otherwise, for art is always its own ombudsman, and thus healthier than its own sickness. Art is the foundation of its own anti-foundationalism, and the anti-foundation of its own foundationalism.

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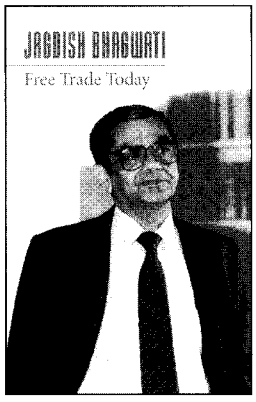

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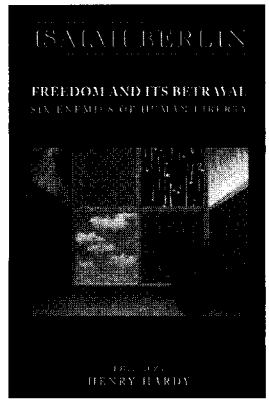

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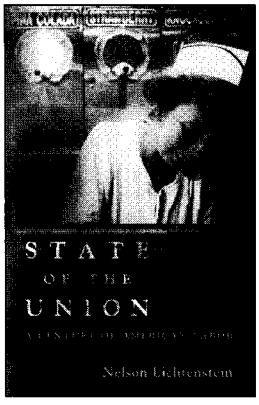

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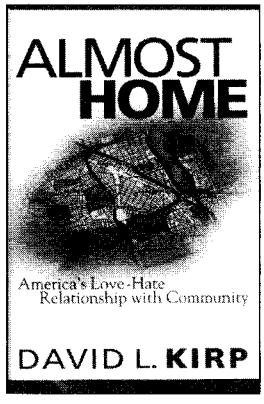

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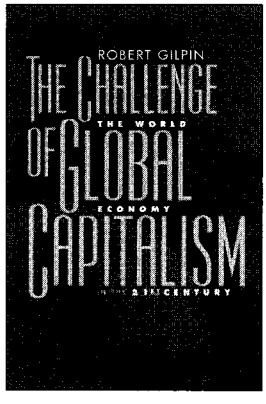

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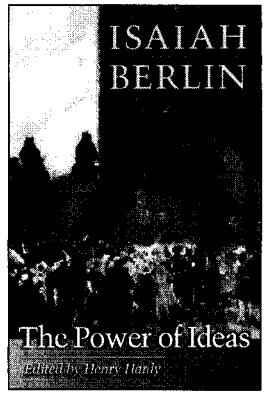

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And from this comes a further paradox: McEwan's perspectivism, whereby we see all the characters equally, cannot avoid having a shaping torque of its own. There is no such thing, really, as a confused or truly messy fiction; distortion is built into the form like radon underneath sick buildings. The greatest, freest, truest, most lifelike fiction is nothing like life (though some is closer to it than others). McEwan certainly knows this.

So innocent Robbie is arrested, and as Robbie is put into the police car Briony again watches from a window: "The disgrace of it horrified her. It was further confirmation of his guilt, and the beginning of his punishment. It had the look of eternal damnation." This is a fine example of how subtly McEwan follows the self-serving theatrics of Briony's mind. The idea that being arrested by the police is confirmation of guilt is a non sequitur indulged in by many people, often to disastrous effect, and probably no more so than to a child, who has rarely if ever seen the police doing their work. It is the final non sequitur from a girl who has consistently allowed the unfinished picture to finish her judgment, who has taken wonders for signs.

In its second and third parts (each about sixty pages long) *Atonement* leaves behind the Tallises' country house, but it cannot leave behind the shadow of Briony's false incrimination. In Part Two, we have advanced by five years, and are following Robbie Turner as he retreats, with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force, through northern France to Dunkirk. We gather that he has been in prison, that he and Cecilia have been corresponding, and that a remorseful Briony, now eighteen, wants to retract her statement to the police so that Robbie's name might be cleared. Cecilia, we learn, has not spoken to her parents or brother since 1935 (they sided with Briony against Robbie); and of course there has been no communication between Cecilia and her younger sister.

But in some ways this information is incidental to McEwan's extraordinary evocation of muddled warfare. I doubt that any English writer has conveyed quite as powerfully the bewilderments and the humiliations of this episode in World War II. After more than twenty years of writing with care and control, McEwan's anxious, disciplined richness of style finally expands to meet its subject. This section is vivid and unsentimental, and most importantly, though McEwan must have researched the war, there is no inky blot of other books: his details have the vividness and body of imagined things, they feel chosen rather than copied.

There is marvelous writing. Robbie has been wounded; he feels the pain in his side "like a flash of colour." Day after day, the British soldiers make their weary, undisciplined way to Dunkirk. They can see where they are supposed to be going, because miles away a fuel depot is on fire at the port, the cloud hanging over the landscape "like an angry father." They are not marching, but walking, slouching. Order has broken down, and a tired anarchy rules. McEwan captures the fatigue—which invades even eating—very well: "Even as he chewed, he felt himself plunging into sleep for seconds on end." Into this obscure, thudding chaos, discrete and vile happenings explode and then disappear. Occasionally the Luftwaffe's planes strafe the straggling infantrymen. And one day Robbie turns to hear behind him a rhythmic pounding on the road:

> At first sight it seemed that an enormous horizontal door was flying up the road towards them. It was a platoon of Welsh Guards in good order, rifles at the slope, led by a second-lieutenant. They came by at a forced march, their gaze fixed forwards, their arms swinging high. The stragglers stood aside to let them through. These were cynical times, but no one risked a catcall. The show of discipline and cohesion was shaming.

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> It was a relief when the Guards had pounded out of sight and the rest could resume their introspective trudging.

As the soldiers near Dunkirk, Robbie crosses a bridge and sees a barge pass under it. It is like the boat in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts": ordinary indifferent life continues while Icarus falls. "The boatman sat at his tiller smoking a pipe, looking stolidly ahead. Behind him, ten miles away, Dunkirk burned. Ahead, in the prow, two boys were bending over an upturned bike, mending a puncture perhaps. A line of washing which included women's smalls was hanging out to dry." Finally, when the soldiers come upon the beach, they taste the salt—"the taste of holidays"—and then they see the remarkable formlessness of an army waiting to be shipped back to England. Some of the men are swimming, others playing football on the sand. One group is attacking a poor RAF officer, blaming him for the Luftwaffe's superiority. Others have dug themselves personal holes in the dunes, "from which they peeped out, proprietorial and smug. Like marmosets...." But the majority of the army "wandered about the sands without purpose, like citizens of an Italian town in the hour of the *passeggio*."

In a novel so concerned with fiction's relation to actuality, this amazing conjuring cannot but fail to have the weird but successful doubleness of the novel's first section: it has a grave reality, while at the same time necessarily raises questions about its own literary rights to that reality. Was Dunkirk really like this? Stephen Crane's evocation of Antietam was so vivid that one veteran swore that Crane (who did not fight) was present with him. Like Crane's descriptions, McEwan's gather their strength not from the accuracy of their notation but from the accumulation of living human detail, so alive that we are persuaded that such a thing might have occurred even if no one actually witnessed it. The soldiers dug into their own little holes in the dunes, like marmosets, has just such a fictive reality, so that it becomes irrelevant to us were a veteran to say: "this never happened." McEwan has made it seem plausible, because alive. This is what Aristotle meant when he said that a convincing impossibility is preferable in literature to an unconvincing possibility. Yet this great freedom shows how dangerous fiction can be, and why its transit with lies has historically been subversive and threatening. Again, McEwan wants us to reflect on these matters. He has Robbie ponder: "Who could ever describe this confusion, and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books? And take the reasonable view and begin to assign the blame? No one would ever know what it was like to be here. Without the details there could be no larger picture." It is fiction, and McEwan's fiction, which provides "the details" that history may miss. But—and this is a gigantic but, surely, which this novel acknowledges—those details may be invented, may never have happened in history.

In Part Three, we see Briony working as a trainee nurse at a London hospital. We learn that she is terribly sorry for what she did in 1935 and that, in a gesture of atonement, she has forsworn Cambridge, and dedicated herself to nursing. Late in the section, she visits her estranged sister in Clapham, and finds her living with Robbie, who has briefly returned from his army service in France. Again, McEwan writes superbly well, especially in his evocation of Briony's nursing experiences. Soldiers arrive, looking identical in their dirt and torn clothes, "like a wild race of men from a terrible world." One of them has had most of his nose blown off, and it falls to Briony to change his dressings. "She could see through his missing cheek to his upper and lower molars, and the tongue glistening, and hideously long. Further up, where she hardly dared look, were the exposed muscles around his eye socket. So intimate, and never intended to be seen." There is great tenderness in this description of the poor soldier's eye muscles, "so intimate and never intended to be seen." We may even think of another moment, earlier in Briony's life, when she also witnessed something "intimate and never intended to be seen." But the mark of the true writer, the writer who is really looking, really witnessing, is that notation of the soldier's exposed tongue as "hideously long"—something worthy of Conrad.

Atonement ends with a devastating twist, a piece of information that changes our sense of everything we have just read. It is convincing enough, but its neatness seems like the reappearance of the old McEwan, unwilling to let the ropes fall from his hands. In an epilogue, set in 1999, we learn that Briony, now a distinguished old novelist, wrote the three sections—the country house scene, the Dunkirk retreat, and the London hospital—that we have just read. Moreover, Robbie and Cecilia were never together, as the third section suggested. Robbie was killed in France in 1940, and Cecilia died in the same year in London, during the German bombing. The conjuring that we have just witnessed has been Briony's atonement for what she did. She could not resist the chance to spare the young lovers, to continue their lives into fiction, to give the story a happy ending.

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This twist, this revelation, further emphasizes the novel's already explicit ambivalence about being a novel, and makes the book a proper postmodern artifact, wearing its doubts on its sleeve, on the outside, as the Pompidou does its escalators. But it is unnecessary, unless the slightly self-defeating point is to signal that the author is himself finally incapable of resisting the distortions of tidiness. It is unnecessary because the novel has already raised, powerfully but murmuringly, the questions that this final revelation shouts out. And it is unnecessary because the fineness of the book as a novel, as a distinguished and complex evocation of English life before and during the war, burns away the theoretical, and implants in the memory a living, flaming presence. ■

The return of a great writer.

The Liar's Tale

By CLAIRE MESSUD

ITALO SVEVO'S THIRD and final novel, *Zeno's Conscience*, is most famously a novel about quitting smoking. It is obviously more than that, an extraordinary and slippery liar's memoir; but when all else is forgotten, Zeno's addiction and its ramifications remain. The Triestine idler Zeno Cosini, and through him the Triestine writer Italo Svevo, make a life's philosophy not simply of smoking, but of the joys of the last cigarette: "I believe the taste of a cigarette is more intense when it's your last," Zeno announces in the book's opening section, "Smoke." "The last one gains flavor from the feeling of victory over oneself and the hope of an imminent future of strength and health." Inevitably, we will learn that neither strength nor health is Zeno's forte. With a pessimist's optimism, he aspires forever to these states, even as he is grateful to be spared them. "Who knows? If I had stopped smoking, would I have become the strong, ideal man I expected to be? Perhaps it was this suspicion that bound me to my habit, for it is comfortable to live in the belief that you are great, though your greatness is latent."

Encapsulated in this dance of resolution and resignation are many of the novel's, and the novelist's, themes. Zeno Cosini is a modern antihero, the bourgeois nephew of Dostoevsky's nameless narrator of *Notes from Underground*—seething, oppressed, suffering, but with a veneer of manners and social pretension, and a comical haplessness. In his supposed search for health, Zeno is in the process of psychoanalyzing himself: this is the novel's premise. Psychoanalysis is perhaps the ultimate bourgeois luxury, and the very notion of an illness that requires analysis is an indulgence. In short, the ailments of the *malade imaginaire* are the diseases of the rich.

Unlike his Dostoevskian counterpart, Zeno would seem to want to shed his disease, just as he would seem to want to stop smoking. But both undertakings are merely feints: he wants above all else to keep smoking, just as he wants to remain "ill," and thereby—as he confesses—to persist in the belief in his potential, or latent, greatness and health. His relationship to analysis, to the writing of the manuscript that we are to read, is that of his bond to the cigarette: an engagement with disease in the pretended hope of health, but in truth for the greater delight of the disease.

"Health doesn't analyze itself, nor does it look at itself in the mirror. Only we sick people know something about ourselves," muses Zeno, with regard to the good health of his wife Augusta. Consciousness—one of the meanings of the novel's Italian title, *La Coscienza di Zeno*—is itself a disease. Zeno goes so far as to assert that "Life does resemble sickness a bit . . . [although] unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal." If being alive, and being conscious, is to suffer ill health, then ill health is clearly a state to be prolonged. To have ostensible faith in the cure, even while knowing that the cure will be lethal and is thus, at all costs, to be avoided: this is the only way forward for Zeno. To be smoking, and yet on the cusp of not smoking, is physically to enact that same paradox. The morbidity of this enterprise reflects, as do his earlier novels, Svevo's devotion to a Schopenhauerian bleakness. But the novel resists the fin-de-siècle decadence of its predecessors; its comedy and its modernist structures make Zeno's anti-vitalism almost joyful, and thoroughly new.

DESIRE IS AT the heart of Zeno's acrobatics: the desire to believe always in the future instead of the past, or even the present. And in the willed heat of passion, the object of desire—the last cigarette, the latest woman—will always be an invention, whose resemblance to the actual is vestigial. Thus Zeno makes ample use of signs and symbols as he plans his last cigarettes—on Napoleon's birthday! on his father's death day! on the day he left studying chemistry for the law, or left studying the law for chemistry!—and thereby grants a particular flavor, a Proustian conjuring power, to each of them.

Zeno drums up his desire for women, and its meaning, as deliberately and arbitrarily as he wills significance into his cigarette-stubbing resolutions. On the eve of consummating his first marital infidelity with the aspiring opera singer Carla, Zeno writes in his dictionary, next to "C," "last infidelity." His apparent hope would seem to be that the words, like a magic spell, would stop him from taking a mistress; but they have only an inverse and titillating effect, like the words "last cigarette." Indeed, when Zeno ultimately breaks off his affair with Carla, he does so unintentionally, by announcing that they will make love "for the last time": "It was a delightful moment. The resolution made by both of us had an efficacy that canceled all guilt. We were innocent and blissful! My benevolent fate had reserved for me an instant of perfect happiness." But Carla

ZENO'S CONSCIENCE
by Italo Svevo
translated by
William Weaver
(Everyman's Library,
437 pp., $20)

EMILIO'S CARNIVAL
(SENILITÀ)
by Italo Svevo
translated by
Beth Archer Brombert
with an introduction by
Victor Brombert
(Yale University Press,
233 pp., $14.95)

A LIFE
by Italo Svevo
translated by
Archibald Colquhoun
(Pushkin Press, 411 pp., £10)

MEMOIR OF ITALO SVEVO
by Livia Veneziani Svevo
translated by Isabel Quigly
(The Marlboro Press/
Northwestern University Press,
178 pp., $15.95)

CLAIRE MESSUD is the author, most recently, of *The Hunters: Two Short Novels*.

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does not know the pleasures of living ironically, of speaking as if she meant it: "All of a sudden, with no pity at all, I was forced to maintain such a resolution. I felt ill, really ill. I limped, and I struggled also with a kind of shortness of breath."

Zeno is a man who has taken to his simultaneously ironic and innocent heart the adage "live every day as if it were your last." Paradoxically, only this presumption enables him to live each day as if it were his first, as a new beginning. His resolutions—like his cigarettes—are a sense-enhancing drug; but being forced to keep them causes him physical pain.

Svevo's novel itself reflects, in its structure, the circular logic by which Zeno orders his life. An autobiography, it is not strictly linear. It is divided into sections covering different aspects of his history: his relationship to smoking, his relationship to his father, his courtship and relationship to his wife and mistress, and his business partnership with his brother-in-law. None of these connections is simple; nor is Zeno's telling of them simple. He confides in us the lies that he has told those around him, and yet we can discern that he also lies to us, his readers (his doctors), without admitting it.

In one spectacular fiesta of mendacity, he leaves his sister-in-law's engagement party to see his mistress, under the auspices of paying a visit to a dying friend named Enrico Copler. In order to keep up his alibi, Zeno stops in on Copler on his way back to the party, only to find that his friend has died. Uncertain whether to disrupt the festivities with sad news, he lies and pretends to his relatives that Copler is still living; then, in a fit of pique, reveals that he is dead; then recants this announcement; so that all are ultimately confused and amused over an event that ought to have been tragic. He provides conflicting information about his opinions and emotions. Although he sometimes seems to see himself clearly—and is unabashed about the baseness of his motives and the cowardliness of his behavior—at other moments he reveals a profound incapacity for self-knowledge. In short, he is that slippery fish, the unreliable narrator, whose comedies unnerve us and whose inconsistencies troublingly resemble our own.

Yet the fundamental outlines of his life are not as elusive as all that. Zeno Cosini is the ne'er-do-well son of a prosperous Triestine businessman, a mama's boy whose relations with his father were never close. Upon his father's death—and this early section, along with the opening section about smoking, is one of the strongest in this marvelous book, bleak and hilarious and above all humanly true—Zeno decides that he needs a wife. He takes, instead, a surrogate father, Giovanni Malfenti, a businessman unlike himself, a "man of health *imaginaire*," and the father of four daughters whose names all begin with the letter A.

Ada and Augusta are the two elder girls of the foursome, and it is upon Ada that Zeno fixates, proceeding to imagine his own Ada into being, with little attention to the reality before him: "She was the woman I had chosen, she was therefore already mine, and I adorned her with all my dreams, so that the prize of my life would appear more beautiful to me. I adorned her, I bestowed on her all the many qualities I lacked and whose need I felt, because she was to become not only my companion but also my second mother, who would adopt me for a whole lifetime of manly struggle and victory." Zeno's idealized Ada bears no necessary relationship to Ada Malfenti; and with comparable whimsy he dismisses her sister Augusta on account of her squint.

Of course, it is not Ada but Augusta whom he marries, after a series of darkly comic errors. Ada—whom Zeno protests hollowly to have renounced for the remainder of the novel, while frequently revealing through his actions that his passion still burns—marries the dapper Guido Speier, who can play the violin beautifully, who "spoke Tuscan fluently, while Ada and I were condemned to our horrid dialect," and who sports a fine head of hair, in painful contrast to Zeno, who comments that "a good deal of my head had been invaded by my brow." Guido is his second self, his alter ego: the man of action to Zeno's man of thought, the supposed success to Zeno's failure (in business, in art, in sex). Guido will prove ultimately the less solid and resilient of the two, a gambler and a weakling. But this does not stop Zeno from hating him, and even from fantasizing about killing him.

Into this grouping of two couples—Zeno and Augusta, Ada and Guido—enter mistresses (Carla for Zeno, Carmen for Guido) and children and unfortunate business ventures. Montale rightly said that "*La Coscienza di Zeno* is a strange book, stagnant and yet continually in motion." It is a novel without plot, in spite of its events; an intricate portrait of Zeno and his relationships rather than a progressive narrative; scrupulously true in spite of, or because of, its innumerable and repeated falsehoods.

SVEVO'S LANGUAGE IS the practical businessman's Italian of Trieste, as distinct from elegant Tuscan as Zeno is from Guido. This accounts at least in part for the lack of enthusiasm with which Svevo's work was initially met in Italy. According to William Weaver, "from

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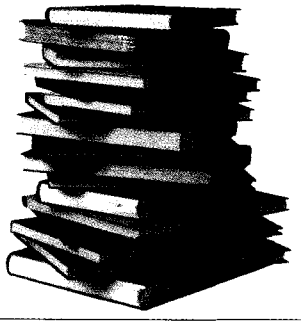

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the beginning of his career critics have insisted that his Italian is clumsy. 'The Italian of a bookkeeper' is a recurrent jibe." Renato Poggioli called it "the least literary and even the least literate, certainly the least polished, Italian ever used by a man of letters in our time."

An embrace of this clumsiness, an effort to render the infelicities of the Italian, is one of the strengths of Weaver's new translation. Beryl de Zoete's version, called *Confessions of Zeno*, has been the only available one in English until now, and it is also fine; but where Svevo is ragged, de Zoete's tendency is to smooth the prose, whereas Weaver is pleasingly unafraid of the cumbersome or colloquial. Weaver's translation is the fresher for this, and clear also. Its unadorned style highlights the fact that Zeno's Trieste could be anywhere, anytime: there is virtually no physical description of place, and very little physical description whatsoever, in this book; and very little to tie it to the period in which it is set. This is one reason why the novel is no less powerful today than it was seventy-five years ago.

The struggle for a public that dogged Svevo's life has continued after his death: *Zeno's Conscience* is acclaimed as a classic, but it is not typically known or read in the way of, say, *Buddenbrooks* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Rather like the late W.G. Sebald, Svevo came to public attention late in life, and barely had time to enjoy his success before being killed in an automobile accident in 1928. Born in Trieste in 1861 to a German Jewish father and an Italian Jewish mother, Ettore Schmitz was educated in Germany but felt his allegiance to be with the Italian irredentists in his hometown. He adopted the pen name Italo Svevo (Italus the Swabian) to reflect both his Italian and his German heritage.

He wanted always to be a writer, but found himself pressured by family and financial necessity to take work in a bank. His brother Elio was his confidant and support, and believed absolutely in his literary talents: "No historian admired Napoleon as much as I admired Ettore," Elio wrote in his diary, before his early death of nephritis at the age of twenty-three, in 1886. Without his brother's support, Ettore continued to pursue his literary ambitions and, while still working in business, published his first novel, *Una Vita*, at his own expense, in 1892. (It is available in English as *A Life*, translated by Archibald Colquhoun and recently re-issued by Pushkin Press.)

The dark and meticulously observed account of a humble bank clerk with literary aspirations, *Una Vita* gained some favorable local reviews and sank without a trace. In truth, the book is long and plodding, with moments of psychological understanding and agonizing truth but without the compelling voice of *Zeno* or the structural elegance and compactness of *Senilità*, Svevo's second novel. A work of apprenticeship, it is of interest largely in relation to Svevo's succeeding novels, for his oeuvre reads rather like a palimpsest, repeatedly addressing the same questions and presenting the same patterns. Alfonso Nitti, the hapless protagonist of *Una Vita*, pursues his boss's daughter in a manner not unlike Zeno at the Malfentis; just as Emilio Brentani, the hero of *Senilità*, has a close and complicated friendship with a sculptor, Stefano Balli, which echoes in Zeno's relationship to Guido.

Italo Svevo by Jack Coughlin for The New Republic

Senilità is being issued in English in a new translation by Beth Archer Brombert, re-titled *Emilio's Carnival*. (This was the title that Svevo envisioned for the novel; the English title of Beryl de Zoete's earlier translation, suggested by James Joyce, is *As a Man Grows Older*.) Like Alfonso Nitti in *Una Vita* and Mario Samigli in Svevo's delightful late work "The Hoax," Emilio Brentani is a modest businessman with literary aspirations and fantasies of greatness. In his mid-thirties he falls in love, for the first time, with a young woman named Angiolina, who is in fact something of a trollop, but whom Emilio insists on seeing as a paragon of beauty and virtue: "He had a certain literary prejudice against the name Angiolina. He called her Lina; but when this abbreviation did not please him he turned her name into French and called her Angèle; or, if he wanted her to be more tender still, he changed it to Ange."

Just like Ada in *Zeno*, this Angel is a fiction—the untruthful fantasy of a narcissistic soul. So bound up is Emilio with this fantasy life that he fails to notice the disintegration of his sister Amalia, whose unrequited love for Balli runs alongside Emilio's passion. Amalia's love is so repressed, however, that she can indulge it only while dreaming, and Emilio overhears her speaking to her beloved while she sleeps. The cost of this thwarted love will be Amalia's life.

In this novel, the despair that subsumes Alfonso Nitti is passed on to Amalia rather than to her brother, while Emilio persists in his amiable but pernicious delusions to the point where, after Amalia's death, he conflates his sister and Angiolina, making of the latter a beauty with moral virtue. *Emilio's Carnival* is a novel about lies: the lies that Angiolina tells Emilio, but more reprehensibly the lies that he cheerfully and persistently tells himself. *Zeno*, too, is an account of hypocrisy and dishonesty, even if Zeno is a more self-knowing self-deluder than Emilio. Indeed, all three of Svevo's novels are about delusion and lying, although the

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tenor of each tale is markedly different.

By the time Svevo published *Senilità*, again at his own expense, in 1898, he had fallen in love with and married his cousin Livia Veneziana, whose parents owned a military paint factory. According to Livia's highly readable and poignant memoir of her husband's life, "No Italian paper mentioned the novel at all, apart from the *Independente* in a supplement. Shaken by public silence and indifference, Ettore wrote: 'I don't understand this incomprehension. It means that people don't understand.... Write one must; what one needn't do is publish.'" And so Ettore Schmitz went to work in his in-laws' business, and Italo Svevo was not publicly heard from for twenty-four years. In 1906, however, Schmitz sought English lessons from an unknown Irishman then living in Trieste, the young James Joyce; and a friendship was formed that eventually proved life-changing for the older man. Joyce read and admired both *Una Vita* and *Senilità*, and particularly praised the latter. In turn, he showed his work to Schmitz, and perhaps drew upon his friend in the shaping of Leopold Bloom. Certainly Livia's name and mane of blonde hair inspired Anna Livia Plurabelle.

Schmitz continued to write fables in secret—not unlike Mario Samigli, the aging businessman in "The Hoax"; and not unlike Zeno himself. Of Samigli, Svevo observes, with the wry and deprecating humor typical of all his work, "He often wrote fables on the disillusion which follows every human activity. It was as if he sought to console himself for the poverty of his own life by saying: 'I am all right. I cannot fail, because I attempt nothing.'" Livia's memoir recalls her husband's years in business, when—touchingly or foolishly, depending on your point of view—he placed his bourgeois duty to his family above his desire to create art. The man who emerges from her pages is wry, self-deprecating, and resigned: a comic nihilist.

BUT SVEVO FINALLY could not resist what he called his "literary demon," and immediately after World War I he started work on what was to become *La Coscienza di Zeno*. A first draft was written in a matter of weeks in 1919, but the novel took three years and many drafts to complete. "He was surprised by the force of inspiration, which gave him no peace," writes Livia. The book was published—once again, at his own expense—in 1923. Without Joyce's intervention, it seems entirely possible that *Zeno's Conscience* would have disappeared without a trace, in the manner of its predecessors; but with the assistance of his now-celebrated supporter Svevo found himself not only published but fêted across Europe. In these last years, Svevo told an acquaintance: "Until last year I was the ... least ambitious man in the world.... Now I am overcome by ambition. I have become eager for praise. I now live only to manage my own glory. I went to Paris ... and all I could see was Italo Svevo.... The *ville lumière* ... seemed to exist only as a function of my glory."

Svevo makes mock of this old man's youthful zeal for fame in "The Hoax," in which Mario Samigli, now sixty, has a practical joke played upon him by a friend, who pretends to him that the long-forgotten novel of his youth is to be published in German. Samigli believes that "he had simply got what he deserved, surely the most natural thing in the world. The only extraordinary thing was that it had not happened before. The history of literature was full of celebrated men who had not been famous quite from birth. At a given moment would appear among them the really great critic (white beard, heavy brow, penetrating eye) or maybe an intelligent businessman ... and immediately they rose to fame." And this naïve fantasy is followed by an astute satirical observation: "For one does not win fame merely by deserving it. The inert mass of the people must be influenced first by one or more powerful minds who choose for them what they shall read. It seems rather absurd, but there is no way out of it. Even

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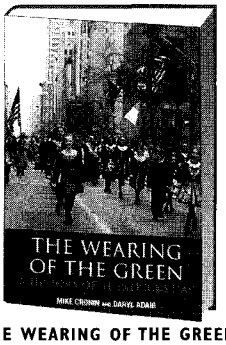

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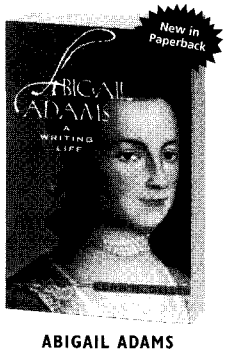

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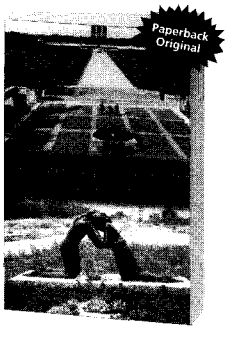

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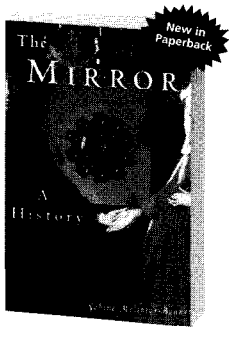

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if the critic understands nothing but his own job, and the publisher (the businessman) does not even understand that, the result is the same. Once the two get together, even a quite undeserving author is made for the time being."

THIS CAPACITY TO indulge naïveté and yet clearly to see through that indulgence is central to Svevo as a writer: he sympathizes powerfully with the importance of fantasy in the little man's dreary existence, having himself lived so long upon the mere fantasy of literary success; and yet he is also aware of its dangers. Samigli may be a cheerful fool, but Svevo's other protagonists are, in their narcissistic preoccupation, dangerous to themselves and to others—indeed, lethal. Alfonso Nitti commits suicide; Emilio Brentani is indirectly responsible for the death of his sister; and Zeno, in spite of all his protestations, is implicated in the suicide of his brother-in-law, partner, and rival, Guido Speier. Lies and delusion may be essential for happiness, Svevo seems to say, but, like smoking, they can have nasty consequences.

In *Zeno* in particular, Svevo goes still further: if the novel begins by asserting that "disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction," the last pages of Zeno's manuscript see him cured of his imaginary illnesses—not by medicine, but by the presence of death in life, by World War I. Having pursued good health without success throughout his life, Zeno finds that his imaginary malady evaporates when the world around him is engulfed in death and destruction. "I do not feel healthy comparatively. I am healthy, absolutely," he insists. "Sorrow and love—life, in other words—cannot be considered a sickness because they hurt." With uncanny pre-atomic prescience, he goes on to predict the apocalypse, the world's end at the hands of "an ordinary man" who invents "an incomparable explosive": "And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness."

Thus ends Zeno's account, a narrative shaped from the fantasy of his birth to the fantasy of his death, from his first introduction to disease to its last banishment from the earth. It is both comedy and horror that that banishment will entail the end of the earth itself; it is also simply life. As Zeno aptly observes to Guido in the midst of their financial troubles, a discovery he makes to his surprise: "Life is neither ugly nor beautiful, but it's original!"

The arc of Svevo's own life was that of a black comedy that he himself might have written: a man's progress from youthful literary aspiration through failure and despair to late, unanticipated literary success, only then to find himself brutally punished for that success by the hand of fate. Svevo anticipated such absurdity: from a very young age, he knew better than most what life is really like. He deserves to be read in order that we might better understand our weak and desirous selves, laughing and suffering at once. *Senilità* is a fine tale, in its precise and tightly structured portrait of a weak man and the toll of his fantasy life upon the reality of others; but *Zeno's Conscience* is a masterpiece, a novel overflowing with human truth in all its murkiness, laughter and terror, a book as striking and relevant today as it was when it was first published, and a book that is in every good way—its originality included—like life. ■

Not Yet the End

By CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD

The Invisible Masterpiece by Hans Belting translated by Helen Atkins

(University of Chicago Press, 480 pp., $45)

NEVER WAS THERE more optimistic nonsense written about abstract art than in Germany after World War II. Abstraction, many artists and critics hoped, would guide the German public back to universal spiritual ideals and reconcile them with European civilization. The Germans were discovering abstract art anew after long years of National Socialist philistinism. "Degenerate Art," the Nazi exhibition of 1937 that is still by far the exhibition of modern art visited by more people than any other, had mercilessly derided Kandinsky and Mondrian. In place of abstraction, the Nazis had promoted muscular Neoclassical sculpture and sentimental portraits of peasant girls with braids. But after the war the Germans repented, at least aesthetically, and agreed to re-embrace pure line, shape, and color.

Critics discovered behind the apparent chaos of abstract painting a deeper harmony, a glimpse of a cosmic lawfulness. Theologians hoped that abstract art might patch together modern man's "divided consciousness," the alienation of subject from object. Others argued that the discoveries of quantum physics—its abandonment of classical causality and logic—endorsed abstraction. Even Martin Heidegger lent his delphic voice, lecturing on Paul Klee and later writing, in an exhibition catalogue, about the reconciliation between man and things proposed by the works of the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida.

But then the world turned again; and it is not surprising that a younger generation of German artists, critics, and art historians, born under National Socialism, were dismayed by the snug fit between the promises of abstract art and the aspirations of the Adenauer-era bourgeoisie. This generation soon discovered the new disenchanted art of the American 1950s and early 1960s: the Pop of Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol, and the Minimalism of Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre.

This was dry, skeptical, even literal-minded art, whose "form" did not lead to "content" in any of the traditional ways. The canvases of Stella were not "abstractions" of anything; they were just painted canvases. The American artists knew nothing about nature or spirit. They were interested only in objects, formats, processes, and institutions. Pop and Minimalism attacked all the myths and the conventions that sustained the great tradition of Western art: the cult of the unique masterpiece, the heroism of the original genius, the gallery and museum spaces themselves. They were the perfect riposte to Heidegger the art critic.

This is the conceptual home ground of Hans Belting's new book, a forceful and highly original history of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art. It first

CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD is professor of art history at Yale University and author of *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (University of Chicago Press).

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appeared in German in 1998 and has now been skillfully translated into English by Helen Atkins. Belting is a distinguished historian of Byzantine and Western medieval art, born in 1935, who has taught at Heidelberg, Munich, and now Karlsruhe. His work on the early history of the Christian image has ramified throughout the entire field of art history. With his inexhaustible imagination and his sharply paradoxical turn of mind, Belting is one of the dominant art historical voices of our time.

BELTING'S THESIS IN his new book is simple, and he frequently repeats it: since 1800, new works of art have failed again and again to live up to the ideal of "absolute" art represented by the concept of the "masterpiece." The bourgeois public has always wanted great works of the sort that they filled their museums with, works like those by Praxiteles or Raphael or Rembrandt. Avant-garde artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries obliged by trying to make modern masterpieces. But they failed, according to Belting.

They failed because a work of art is in the end just an object, and can never embody a metaphysical abstraction. Some prescient artists, notably Manet and Duchamp, did hint at the futility of the modernist project. Still, for much of the twentieth century, abstract art continued to hold out the utopian possibility of a reconciliation between matter and spirit. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, according to Belting, that artists and philosophers of art finally conceded that the game was up.

This is an ironic history of modernism, written in effect from the disillusioned, dispassionate point of view of the American Pop or Minimalist artist circa 1965. There are many affinities between Belting's point of view and that of Arthur C. Danto, the American philosopher turned art critic. Danto has argued that since Warhol we no longer know, or care, what art is. Warhol demonstrated the emptiness of the concepts of authorship, originality, aura, integrity of the work, and artistic content, and so brought the history of modernism to an end. Now, according to Danto, anything can be art and artists can do whatever they please. Artists no longer fret about what art might be or where it might be heading. Danto calls our own time the "Post-Historical Period of Art," and he asserts with satisfaction that "there is no reason for it ever to come to an end."

Belting made a similar argument in 1983 in his pamphlet *The End of the History of Art?* There he pointed out to art historians that contemporary artists working in the spirit that we used to call "postmodernist" had roundly abandoned the notion that art had any sort of history at all. He recommended that art historians adjust their own practice accordingly—for example, by resisting the temptation to force their historical subject matter into narrative trajectories with predetermined destinations.

Danto announces his own emancipation from utopian or metaphysical delusions as often as possible, as if he were still busy burying the pretensions of American Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting—the often grandiose abstract painting of the 1950s and early 1960s, by artists such as Rothko, Still, Motherwell, and Louis. And it is true that American critics of the time wrote almost as much nonsense about these artists as their German counterparts did about their own (admittedly less gifted) abstract painters. Danto and Belting both came of intellectual age in the era of Warhol, and they liked what they saw. Later, in the 1980s, their writing on art converged around the postmodernist idea that works of art could no longer derive their meaning from their place within a narrative history of art. Belting and Danto now frequently reinforce each other in print. They see themselves, perhaps, as the Gombrich and Popper of their day, the art historian and the philosopher of science who in the 1960s and 1970s used to publicly advertise their intellectual friendship as a kind

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of liberal bulwark against Hegel's idealist theory of history.

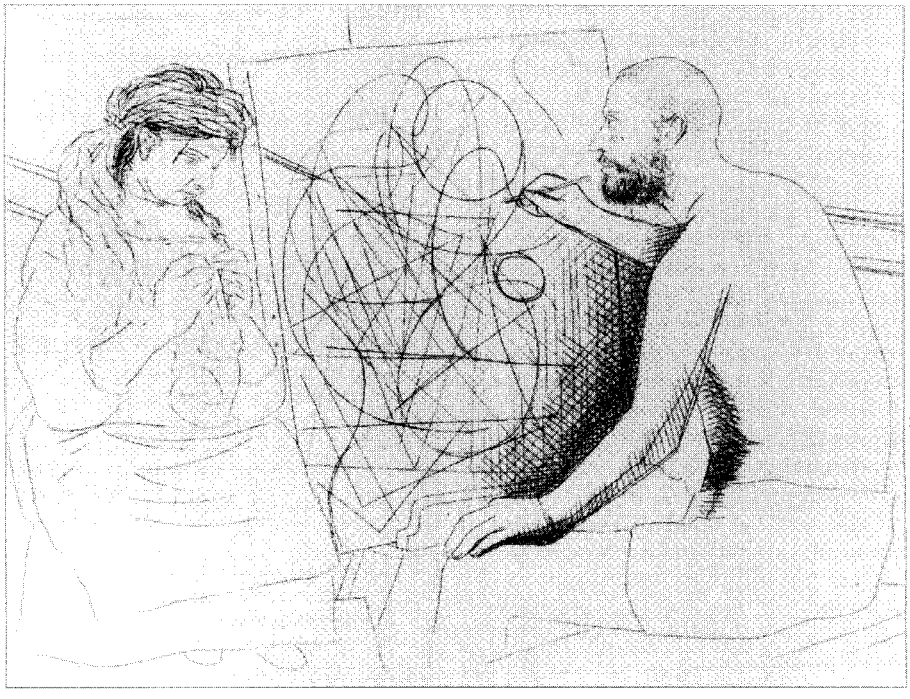
BELTING'S NEW BOOK begins with the Louvre, the national museum of France, founded in 1793 and instantly stocked with masterpieces of ancient sculpture and modern painting. The Louvre, once and for all, extracted these admired samples of ingenuity and taste from temples, churches, and palaces and set them before the eyes of Frenchmen. The original historical functions of the Greek statue or the Renaissance altarpiece, whether cultic or propagandistic, were, as much as possible, forgotten. Instead the treasures of the museum testified to a common ideal: the ideal of "art," an ideal difficult to define but (as everyone agreed) solidly embodied in the masterpieces of the past. Artists over the next century and a half spent a great deal of time in the Louvre scrutinizing historical art, trying to figure out how to make their own masterpieces. The bourgeois public, who were frequenting the same galleries, expected no less from their artists.

Belting then tells the story of Romantic painting in a series of brisk, wry episodes. The painters are all cursed by the past. They know too much art history. Ingres becomes obsessed with Raphael and paints a series of pictures illustrating his life. Delacroix sinks into despair when he realizes that "all the great problems of art were solved back in the sixteenth century." He struggles to produce a "true masterpiece" of his own, a painting that would be "an argument for the immortality of the soul." Meanwhile, in Germany, a cult develops around Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which had been in Dresden since 1753. This great canvas in its simplicity and directness seemed to transcend its historical origins and speak to every modern beholder across the gulf of time. It was testimony to the miracle of art. It is hard to overstate the role that this work played in the German aesthetic imagination. Winckelmann, Schlegel, Hegel, Wagner, Nietzsche, Mann, Heidegger, and Benjamin all wrote about the *Sistine Madonna*. Already by the early nineteenth century the gods had been supplanted by the great painters. Belting remarks almost in passing that "the Christian religion ... by now amounted to nothing but an aesthetic need."

Belting's history of modern art clusters around the meta-masterpieces, those ancient and modern works that most attracted the attention of writers and thinkers and so came to stand for the very possibility that a single work might embody an ineffable ideal of art. So, for instance, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), a mighty effort to jettison the past and embrace a modern subject, in this instance a shipwreck, figures as a metaphor for art's own struggle for permanent life. Belting soon abandons Géricault's picture itself and turns to its afterlife in the writings of Peter Weiss and Julian Barnes and the contemporary painter Martin Kippenberger. Another chapter is devoted to the nineteenth-century cult of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*.

The first clear note of doom, in Belting's account, was struck by Balzac in his story *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, or "The Unknown Masterpiece," written in 1831. Belting makes this brilliant, complex tale the centerpiece of his entire book, as its title suggests. Balzac imagines an encounter between the young Poussin, just arrived in Paris from the provinces in 1612, and an ancient curmudgeon named Frenhofer, last pupil of the early sixteenth-century Flemish master Jan Gossaert. Frenhofer has spent years sequestered in his studio working on a mysterious masterpiece that he refuses to show to anyone. He boasts defiantly that his painting will capture the essence of the female, body and spirit, as no other modern painting has done. But when the masterpiece is finally revealed, Poussin sees no woman; he sees nothing at all, just "colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint." Only in the lower corner of the canvas does he spy the tip of a bare foot, the merest hint of a foot emerging from the chaos. That night Frenhofer burns all his work and dies.

To find such a text, with its apparent prophecy of abstraction, perched on the threshold of modern painting is almost too good to be true; and virtually every modern French critic and theorist of art has felt compelled to write something about Balzac's story. For Belting, the story is a parable of the futility of aesthetic idealism, and from this point on in his account there can be no apology for the pretensions of the idealist artist. Frenhofer's failure predetermines all the stubborn failures of modernism, and Belting's book must proceed under this cloud. (Balzac's story, by the way, has just been retranslated by Richard Howard and published by New York Review Books with an introduction by Arthur Danto, who finds a way to make mention of Belting's work on the medieval cult image.)



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Picasso, etching for Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*

Baudelaire urged the modern painter to heed the lesson of Balzac's tale and resist the "morbid allure" of beauty. Instead, Baudelaire proposed, the artist must confront modern life itself, and capture its dynamism and glitter by transfiguring it into paint. Manet succeeded in doing this, momentarily, in his *Olympia* (1863) and his *Bar at the Folies-Bergères* (1881–1882). But even these metallic fictions, in Belting's view, were haunted by the ideal of absolute art. For the bourgeois public, "modernity" and "art" could not be fused, and Manet's pictures were slowly transformed back into museum pieces. As time passed, Proust correctly predicted, the once vast gulf between Ingres and Manet would close. In the writings of Proust and Ruskin, and in the paintings of the late Monet, the tone is again melancholy and the idea of art ripe for another dethroning.

That dethroning came at the hands of Duchamp and his readymades, the now-

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quaint scandals of *Bottlerack* (1914), *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (i.e., the snow shovel, 1915), and *Fountain* (i.e., the urinal, 1917). For Belting, Duchamp decisively demonstrated that all works of art are empty fictions, tokens of a valueless currency, the ideal of absolute art. At the time, however, Duchamp's readymades only seemed to offer new theoretical legitimation for abstraction by liberating art from the expectations of the public and re-affirming its radical autonomy, or freedom.

To Belting's exasperation, the avant-garde refused to abandon its project, which he defines as the "eternal struggle against matter and against the death of the work." The abstract painters of the 1910s and 1920s, Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian, believed that pure form would help to defeat the "serpent" of materialism, and perhaps even usher in a new historical epoch. These were the very ideas about painting revived by the proponents of abstract art after World War II. Belting, like so many other Germans of his generation, has little sympathy for utopian aspirations.

BELTING'S TWENTIETH CENTURY finally shapes up as a dialectic between Duchamp and Picasso. The latter did not seem to want to hear the bad news about the end of absolute art, and so went ahead and painted a painting that is very like a masterpiece: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Picasso believed that he could keep art alive simply by looking for models elsewhere than in the Louvre, in this case in African sculpture. But in fact Picasso showed no signs at all of wanting to escape the conundrum described by Balzac. He went on and on like Frenhofer, trying to capture the female nude on canvas after canvas.

Whether Picasso had any success in this venture is, for Belting, moot. For the project had simply lost its meaning. Inevitably Picasso fell under the spell of Balzac's story. In 1931, Ambroise Vollard published an edition of the story illustrated with thirteen etchings by Picasso. (This is one of a number of points at which the Balzac tale re-enters Belting's narrative, ingeniously knitting the book together and preventing it from ever reading like a textbook.) In these etchings Picasso dramatizes the crucial shift—for him, the archetypal shift—of the painter's desire and attention away from the female model and onto the unfinished work itself. Picasso was drawn to the Old Masters: he copied their works and engaged them—Velázquez, notably—in agonistic competition, and he painted pictures designed to hang on the walls of the great museums.

Duchamp was also drawn to the Old Masters. In 1919 he took a postcard of the *Mona Lisa* and added a mustache, a beard, a signature, and the punning letters *L.H.O.O.Q.* Later he constructed two elaborate anti-masterpieces, the *Large Glass* and the *Étant donnés* . . . , both now in Philadelphia, "riddles rather than works" in any traditional sense. In these two projects, all the elements of the old idealist project came crashing into one another: the nude female model; the voyeurism of the male artist and his complicity with the beholder; the perspectival devices serving as a cover for the erotic, predatory impulse; the entire ritual "staging" of the work in the museum. Belting's complex readings of Duchamp's *Large Glass* and *Étant donnés* . . . are among the most successful sustained interpretations of single works in the book. For Belting, Duchamp prized apart the idea and the object and thus foreshadowed the radical split carried out in the 1960s, when some artists produced works that were nothing but ideas (Conceptual Art) and others produced works that were nothing but objects (Minimalism).

From this point Belting's narrative rushes toward the 1960s as if drawn by a magnet. Pollock and Rauschenberg figure as heroes, of course, though even they work "under the shadow of the museum." They are still trying to "capture" the motif, and in the end they are foiled by the materiality of paint and canvas, no matter how they try to escape by putting a canvas on the floor or hanging bedclothes on the wall. The real "Call to Freedom," as the penultimate chapter is titled with uncharacteristic earnestness, was issued by Warhol. In this and the final chapter Belting runs through an accelerated survey of Pop, Conceptual Art, Minimalism, performance art, Happenings, object art, Fluxus, installation art, appropriation art, video art, media art, and finally photography, oddly enough making here its first appearance in the book (apart from a brief mention of the nineteenth-century photographer Félix Nadar).

Along the way Belting does generate some suspense about how exactly his account will end, where it will point. In the end, it points nowhere. Once he has discredited the avant-garde project of a heroic struggle to capture the ineffable in the matter of paint, Belting is left without any model for what art might do or what its place in modern life might be. His closing examples and episodes have a fatigued and desultory quality. The final chapter of the book focuses on Tom Wesselman, Roy Lichtenstein, Malcolm Morley, Renato Guttoso, Marcel Broodthaers, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Wall, artists who

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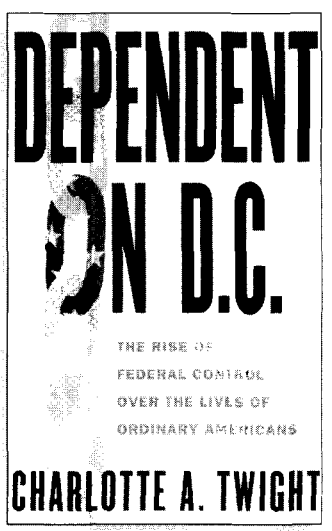

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seem to have little to offer, at least in Belting's account, but a melancholic, toothless nostalgia for the old idea of great art. It is a neat case for the essential pointlessness and superfluity of art—which is not quite the case, I think, that Belting really wants to make.

BELTING HAS WRITTEN about the art of the modern era as if from a distance of centuries. He approaches the idea that a work of art might afford a glimpse of a hidden alternative reality as if it were an outlandish fable. At one point he remarks in a curiously matter-of-fact way that the association of art with the "deepest mystery" was an idea "which had, after all, only entered people's cultural awareness with Romanticism." It is hard to gather from Belting's ingenious, relentless narrative why anyone over the past two centuries has bothered about art at all.

In Belting's book, museumgoers figure only as gulls, and philosophers of art only as irresponsible dreamers. The book offers no criterion for artistic achievement, unless it is proximity to Warhol. At one point Belting chides Stendhal for not seeing what made Delacroix's *Massacre of Chios* "so superior" to the other works in the Salon of 1824. But Belting does not really explain what he himself means by "superior," either; and he never again tries to do so. There is just no foothold for art in this book.

Belting cares enormously about contemporary art, but something has gone awry in his disaffected account of its prehistory. He has gotten himself into a bind by focusing on a conceptual model for the modern work of art that is far too limited. That model is basically the one established in the Middle Ages by the theological critics of idolatry. The religious image, according to its detractors, was doomed to fail because divinity is infinite and intangible and so it can never be reduced to shape, line, and color. Jewish, Muslim, and the stricter Christian theologians all agreed that a painting was too gross a vehicle to give an adequate rendering of pure spirit. When Belting says that the modern easel painting can never capture the ideal of freedom or the ideal of truth, he is saying more or less the same thing.

Here Belting's history of modern art links up with his earlier scholarly work on early Christian and medieval art. His extraordinary book *Likeness and Presence*, which appeared in 1990, is a monumental history of the Christian icon, covering more than a millennium of material. It is one of the most important art historical books of the last half-century. In *Likeness and Presence*, Belting traced the icon from its origins in late antique royal portraiture and pagan ancestor cults. The icon was a portrait of the divine personage—Jesus or the Virgin Mary—and purported to stand in magically for that otherworldly person. The icon was a surrogate body. But this was a pagan system and it did not sit well with Christian theologians, who maintained that a painted wooden panel could not possibly capture the elusive, potent *numen* of the Godhead. They felt that paintings could at best represent the idea of divinity, that is, convey it through some agreed-upon symbolic language.

Belting shows how the icon adapted to this criticism throughout the medieval centuries, first embedding itself within an elaborate framing device, the altarpiece, that attested to its real connection to the cultic mysteries, and later developing a new animation and rhetorical flexibility in order to attract and to persuade worshippers. By the early sixteenth century, however, the period of the Italian High Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, the icon's days were numbered. The theologians banished the magical image from the religious rite and exiled it to the secular realm, to palaces and villas, and to the dwellings of the bourgeoisie. The icon was dead, or it survived only as a puppet suitable for the poor and the credulous. In its place was born the modern work of art, with a private magic of its own.

FOR BELTING, THE glory days of the work of art stretched from 1500 to 1800. In those centuries, he suggests, art knew its aims and its proper place in society. Art adorned life and told absorbing stories about gods, heroes, and modern history. This epoch was at least aesthetically stable. But the trouble began all over again around 1800, in Belting's telling, when artists began to listen to what the philosophers Kant, Fichte, and Hegel were saying about them, and got caught up once more in unreasonable metaphysical pretensions. Modernity's error, for Belting, was to have gone on trying to produce religious art long after the death of the icon. In effect, Belting presents the futile quest to produce a modern masterpiece as the profane, secular version of the old Christian effort to capture the physiognomies of Jesus and especially Mary in paint.

He thus retells art history as a tale of doomed love. The real leitmotiv of Belting's book is the erotic encounter between the male artist and the (usually nude) female model. Painting from the live model is an infinitely intriguing encounter, at least for the painter, and it captures Belting's imagination, even if he knows that it has to be broken up and the studio wall has to be torn down. It is striking how many key episodes of *The Invisible Masterpiece* involve attempts to fix the female form: Ingres's fascination with Raphael and his model and mistress "La Fornarina," the odalisques of Ingres and Delacroix, the modern cults of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Manet's *Olympia*, Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, Cézanne's ungainly bathers, Ruskin's writing on the Golden Virgin of Amiens, Picasso's many female figures, Matisse's new odalisques, Duchamp's ravaged "brides," Warhol's *Mona Lisa*, Nam June Paik's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*.

It is inevitable that an account of the history of art driven by this chivalric model will falter. The hackneyed geometry of voyeurism and desire is not enough of a conceptual scaffolding for the work of art. This was clarified once and for all by Jacques Rivette's film *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991), a non-ironic retelling of Balzac's story that transposes it to the present. The film treats the drama of the studio confrontation between the male painter and his elusive female quarry as if it were still a burning urgency, as if that encounter still captured the essence of art-making. The failure of this film, which points to the bankruptcy of the ideal of the artist and the model, is that in watching it one has absolutely no curiosity about the painting, the "Unknown Masterpiece," which, just as if one were still reading Balzac's story, one never actually sees. The weakest moment of Belting's book is thus the concluding moment, in which he describes Rivette's film as "a stage on which the memory of the work's aura is performed once again." This demoralizing passage suggests that there is simply nothing else left for art to do. Belting closes his book with a still from Rivette's film, a shot of Emmanuelle Béart crouching naked, sphinx-like, on the floor of the studio in Michel Piccoli's rambling château.

IT IS RARE to find an historian of premodern art who can write with confidence on modern art (though not as rare, admittedly, as the specialist on modern art who writes on pre-modern art). Only a few have ventured it: Meyer Schapiro, whose essays on Impressionism remain as vital as his pioneering studies of Romanesque art; Leo Steinberg, the maverick who both deciphered the Sistine Ceiling and explained why Rauschenberg put pillows and patches of grass in his paintings; and—for Belting the most significant predecessor—Hans Sedlmayr, an Austrian scholar with pronounced Fascist leanings, a specialist on medieval and Baroque architecture, whose brilliant reactionary diatribe against modern art, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (1948), was

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widely read and frequently reprinted in the postwar period.

Belting's book can be read as an ambivalent rebuttal, published exactly half a century later, to Sedlmayr's book. For a decade Belting occupied Sedlmayr's former academic position, the prestigious chair of art history at the University of Munich. He now writes, as Sedlmayr did, for a wide bourgeois public. Sedlmayr recognized in 1948 that modern artists were not merely incompetent, perverse, or cynical, as the "Degenerate Art" show had foolishly claimed. Instead he saw modern art as the powerful expression of modern civilization's deliberate abandonment of God and of an ideal image of man. Sedlmayr deplored modern art, but he conceded its gravity and its effectiveness. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, his view challenged the optimistic, conciliatory claims made for abstract painting, which welcomed abstract paintings as if they were new icons, channels to the divine. Sedlmayr instead stressed the unbridgeable gulf between the religious art of the High Middle Ages, with all its questing sincerity, and our modern artifacts, with their deadly flatness and emptiness.

Belting's dilemma is clear: he agrees with Sedlmayr that the main drama of modern art is its abandonment of the ideal. He considers Christianity to have been an empty formula already by the early nineteenth century—but he does not regret this negative turn, as Sedlmayr did. In what spirit, then, does one write the history of a negation? There can be no hope of an answer from Hegel, who wanted to "negate the negation" by installing a new idealism. Such idealism led only to more utopian schemes, even social and political messianisms to which painting and sculpture were duly expected to contribute. Belting, a liberal, is skeptical of all this. In the end he chooses simply to show us how, institutionally, modern art went about disentangling itself from idealism. What is the "content" of modern art? There is no content at all. And Belting, following Warhol, is unruffled by this verdict.

The Marxist art historian T. J. Clark has recently written an intellectual testament in which he, unlike Belting, fully acknowledges the success and the force of modern art, and yet laments that success. For Clark sees that modern painting, with all its ingenious "representational deflections," quickly lost sight of its original Baudelairean purpose, the description and the criticism of modern life. Belting, by contrast, shares none of Clark's grief and frustration. He seems to have no confidence in the capacity of paintings to say anything important about modernity. Indeed, modern life enters into Belting's account only through its institutions, never through the pictures themselves.

In retrospect, the disenchanted "Pop" flavor of Belting's book was already present in his work on medieval art. Belting never tried to bring medieval art "back to life"; he never forced medieval images into cozy "contextual" relationships with the social, political, or intellectual life of the time. One was always thankful for the absence in his work of any of those nostalgic, crypto-Christian sympathies that contaminate so much work in the medieval field. Instead Belting told the story of the icon as a cold competition between formats, functions, doctrines, and institutions. It was a clinical history, as if medieval art was, if not dead, at least anesthetized. And he treats modern art the same way. Finally one cannot tell whether Belting has no confidence at all in the concept of meaning or whether he simply considers meaning an irretrievably private affair.

I TEACH ART history next door to a pretty important art school, and as far as I can see the art students in the studios are neither paralyzed by history nor wandering forward aimlessly, cut off from history. Among the twenty-five-year-olds, I think, there is no abatement in the drive to make art, and there is no loss of confidence. Belting teaches at an art school in Germany, so he must see this, too. It is true that young artists no longer take the human soul as a model for the integrity of a work of art, or erotic tension as the model for the act of creation. They are interested simply in "work," no longer in "the work," the self-contained artifact that the dealers, the museums, and the critics expect of them. It is also true that young artists today no longer cower under the burden of, say, Picasso, as Pollock once did. But that is a far cry from saying, as Arthur Danto does, that today's artists have been liberated from history. It is just that they look back and see a different history of art, a history completely reshaped not only by Duchamp and Warhol, but also by more recent artists such as Robert Morris, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Robert Smithson.

Those figures are mentioned briefly or not at all in Belting's book. Their art, much of it made in the 1970s, is best understood not in terms of discrete works, but in terms of processes, installations, sites, events, performances, information, statements, sketches, notes, projects. It is art that reflects intensely and mysteriously on the precariousness of coded meaning, on the brave promises of information and evidence, on the disappointment of visible form. Such art, even more

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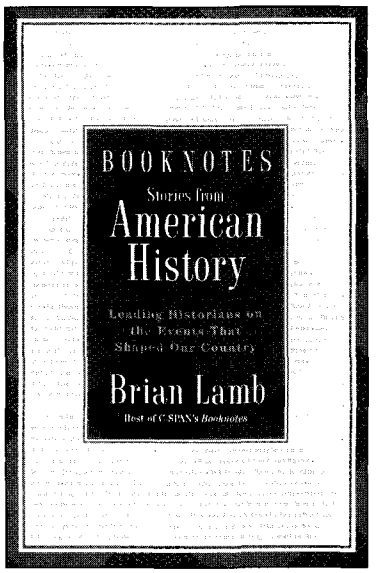

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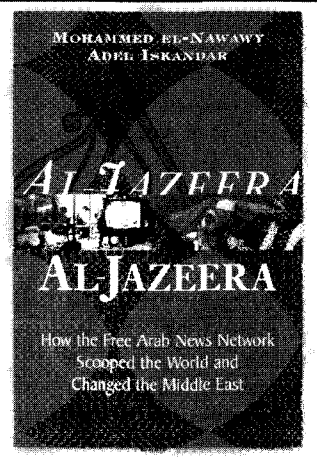
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radically than Pop or Minimalism, cannot easily be traced back to the studio and is not conveniently displayed or sold.

Duchamp's ironic "riddles" and anti-masterpieces do not debunk art so much as alter the definition of art. In a flash he transfigures the rest of art history, not only the serene and replete art of the Old Masters, but also the work of his own aesthetic children, the—only apparently—jaded and affectless art of the 1960s and 1970s. It turns out that all art, when it is on target, is as dense and as stringent as Duchamp's. The historical process of disenchantment that Hans Belting describes is far from complete. ■

Tighter and Tighter

By RUTH FRANKLIN

The Haunting of L. by Howard Norman

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 326 pp., $24)

HOWARD NORMAN'S novels are hard to like. Starting in 1987 with *The Northern Lights*, each novel has featured a taciturn, antisocial male protagonist, as disconnected from his own inner life as he is from the people around him. Norman's landscapes mirror the emptiness of the characters who inhabit them: this American writer is unique in setting his books in the bleakest regions of Canada, from the expanses of northern Manitoba to turn-of-the-century Newfoundland. And his prose is as inhospitable as the terrain. Bumpy in pace and flat in texture, it goes down awkwardly, like something hard to chew.

Norman's protagonists get themselves into harrowing situations: adultery, theft, murder. But when these situations force them to take the measure of their characters, they invariably come up short. Some eventually recognize their own limitations, but that is as much as Norman offers in the way of epiphany or resolution. To Forster's famous exhortation "Only connect," Norman's characters answer, "How?" In contrast to the exuberant irony of Don DeLillo or Dave Eggers, this detachment, whittled down further by the monochromatic apathy of Norman's style, seems the very essence of late postmodernism.

Each of Norman's novels is in its way a bildungsroman, following a character's emotional development from immaturity to self-awareness. Read together, of course, the novels become also the story of Norman's development as a writer. His progress has occurred in huge leaps, with each novel deepening in emotional complexity as well as resolving the flaws of the one that preceded it. *The Northern Lights* is a coming-of-age story more original than most, but—not unusually for a first novel—its impact is hampered by overly emphatic symbolism and inconsistent pacing. *The Bird Artist*, published in 1994, smoothes out the pacing and lightens up on the symbols, but it suffers from an overly eccentric and implausible main female character. In *The Museum Guard*, which appeared three years later, Norman broadened his scope, examining what it means to engage with a work of art against the backdrop of the approach of World War II. Though the female protagonist at first appears to be another of Norman's mannered eccentrics, in the end her behavior has a compelling foundation, and the book is Norman's subtlest and deepest work so far.

The expectation that mounts after a writer produces a great book is similar to the desire for dessert after a luxurious meal: we shouldn't need it, but we want it anyway, and so much the better if it is big and rich. And so it is disappointing that Norman's progress seems to have halted with *The Haunting of L.* Ironically, the protagonist has greater emotional depth than any of his predecessors; but this time it is the story that does not live up to the character. Each of his books has been notable for the restraint of its central character, but here it is his own imagination that Norman is restraining.

BOTH *THE NORTHERN LIGHTS* and *The Bird Artist* are anchored by their characters' isolation, epitomized by the sentence from Giorgio Bassani that serves as epigraph to the latter book: "Suddenly, with extreme violence, he felt himself seized by the desire to be, rain or no rain, at any price, in the midst of the valleys: alone." Noah, the teenage protagonist of *The Northern Lights*, lives with his mother and orphaned cousin in an area so remote that "our house in northern Manitoba made up the entire village of Paduola Lake." The only transportation in and out is the sporadic mail plane. His mother, Mina, collects fanciful postcards depicting the story of Noah's ark, which she—and apparently Norman, rather ponderously—sees as a prototype for their family: "This house is ... like an ark, one that's drifted into a part of the world which, well, it has dangers," she tells her two charges. The biblical story, of course, is one of companionship amid isolation, but Noah himself (the novel's protagonist, not the biblical character) experiences it more as isolation amid companionship.

Noah spends summers with his friend Pelly in Quill, where they fish and play checkers with the native Cree people. (Norman's depiction of the Cree Indians is one of the more effective elements of *The Northern Lights*, particularly the way he renders their halting speech by inserting commas after nearly every word: "Coffee, I get, now.... See you, later, sometime, eh?") At night they listen to the radio, new to Quill, which brings news from as far away as Toronto and Halifax. But the novel begins to run aground when, after Pelly's sudden death, Noah returns to Quill to stay with Pelly's parents. Norman has not shown us enough of Noah's relationship with Pelly—we certainly are not privy to many of his thoughts—for us to understand their closeness. And the real reason for Noah's visit to Quill becomes apparent soon enough: Norman needs him there to discover that his father, Anthony, has become a hermit, living in a disheveled shack in the woods outside the town.

The chapter that brings Noah to the confrontation with his father is uneven and jerky, but the scene that awaits him inside the hut is magnificently drawn. Anthony's favorite pastime in better days was flipping through the *Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, and Norman now vividly picks up on this to evoke Anthony's mental disarray:

> [The hut's] door was propped open with a bassoon stuck in the ground. A hacked-apart cello lay in the threshold.... A clarinet, an oboe, and a few string instruments were in the fireplace, smoke issuing from keyholes, heating the soup. Hung on the wall were a triangle and a trombone. An accordion was fanned out on the floor.

Though Noah is able to elicit only shrieks and howls from the broken instruments, his attempt to play them at all is the first step toward overcoming the distance that he imposes between him-

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self and others, and learning to communicate. He joins his mother and cousin in Toronto, and reaches out to a Cree family he meets. The last scene of the novel, in which Noah has an unsatisfying encounter with a man he used to listen to on the radio, represents the final failure of the radio to substitute for human contact.

THE LEAP THAT Norman made during the seven years that separated his first novel from his second is evident already in the first paragraph of *The Bird Artist*, which presents one of the most startling narrative voices of the last decade:

> My name is Fabian Vas. I live in Witless Bay, Newfoundland. You would not have heard of me. Obscurity is not necessarily failure, though; I am a bird artist, and have more or less made a living at it. Yet I murdered the lighthouse keeper, Botho August, and that is an equal part of how I think of myself.

Those lines, delivered with the dispassion that defines Fabian, are so stupefyingly declarative that they verge on the parodic. Of course we would not have heard of Fabian: he is a fictional character. But this sentence asks us to place ourselves within the universe of Fabian's book: the tiny community of Witless Bay, about which the word "insular" would seem to imply too much breathing room. *The Bird Artist*, as the first paragraph encapsulates, is about Fabian's drive to define himself, both as an individual and as a part of this community.

As a child Fabian discovered his talent for drawing birds from nature; he begins to sell drawings to bird magazines, saving money for his escape from Witless Bay. Meanwhile he draws, does odd jobs, and sleeps with his childhood friend Margaret Handle. Unbeknownst to Fabian, his parents have decided to arrange his marriage to a cousin in Nova Scotia—their own way of getting him out of Newfoundland. But when his father leaves on a hunting trip to earn money for the wedding, his mother moves in with Botho August. Fabian cannot tolerate his father's humiliation, and he shoots Botho.

Fabian's preternatural restraint—at times it seems close to autism—dominates the book. If *The Northern Lights* is the story of Noah's learning to talk, *The Bird Artist* is the story of Fabian's learning to feel. Before his mother takes up with Botho August, nothing has the power to move him. Even afterward—he narrates these events from twelve years hence—the flatness of his language shocks. Toward the middle of the novel, trying to explain his mother's actions, Fabian remarks to himself: "I had often wondered if I had missed what she had intended as most intimate in her observations, opinions, advice, even in her very occasional teasing. I have come to the conclusion, with bracing regret, that I had." The strange formulation "bracing regret" seems to repudiate any emotion it might suggest.

But it is with regard to Margaret—with whom, by arrangement, he spends only Tuesday and Thursday nights—that Fabian evinces the most startling combination of "enticement" and distance. Margaret is, naturally, infuriated by his acquiescence in the arranged marriage; though the marriage is annulled on the spot with Fabian's arrest for Botho's murder, she will not forgive him. Back in Witless Bay awaiting trial, Fabian's thoughts return to a time several years before when Margaret had attempted to seduce him in an ice-fishing shack and he demurred. "I do not know why that day, of all days, kept plaguing me, kept repeating itself in my thoughts. Maybe because it was such a clear example of how I shrank from any given moment of enticement. There had only been a yes or no, right there." Yet even when they eventually reconcile—looking at the sky, Margaret comments that "stars know just the proper distance to keep from each other"—Fabian still shrinks back at the crucial moment: "I thought this: For all my painting of rapturous shore birds, long-necked herons, ibis in dusky light, I did not have the means to describe how

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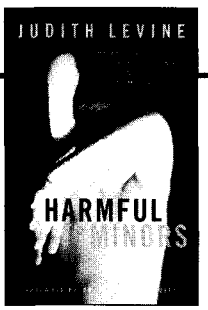

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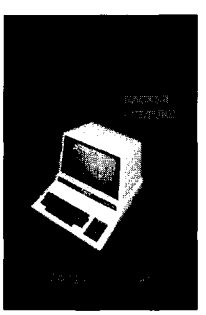

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passionate I felt toward Margaret just then, without having yet touched her. Her very skin seemed to hold twilight, delay it, and I retreated to the edge of the blanket." Fabian has learned the technique of drawing birds, but his art has not taught him how to live.

Fabian's trial is a sham: his father, who has fled, has told Fabian to blame the murder on him, and he does so without much remorse. But in the eyes of the villagers he is still guilty. "I was legally acquitted. Yet a village has an intuition of its own, plus which everyone knows that the truth is larger than the law." His neighbors whisper "Slieveen," a local word meaning "deceitful person," when he passes. It is the minister, whom he despises, who offers him a chance for redemption: he must paint a mural on the church's walls, in which he depicts his crime: "Birds are not enough."

But the book ends on a disquieting note. Fabian says that twelve years have passed; he and Margaret have had a child, and he continues to sell his bird drawings. And yet: "Just yesterday Isabel Kinsella hissed, 'Slieveen!' near the orchard. Yet I have to say this was a rare occurrence. Isabel was just out for a walk, I imagine, lost in thought, when she saw me and was overcome." The placement of "overcome" as the last word of this novel about restraint is unnerving. Reading *The Bird Artist*, one must constantly reassess the gap between the drama of the acts Fabian relates and the coldness of his tone. Is this a failure of experiencing emotion or of relating emotion? Norman makes it impossible to be certain which it is—or if, in the end, there is much difference.

Fabian's discomfiting, frustrating, penetrating voice is an immense achievement by Norman. But the strict filter of Fabian is a particular problem when it comes to the character of Margaret. She is as passionate as he is restrained, but it is impossible fully to perceive her through the squint of Fabian's lens. Her actions, presented without preparation or explanation—such as when she abruptly takes out a gun and shoots the photograph of Fabian's fiancée—seem melodramatic rather than deeply felt. And her habit of drinking a bottle or two of whiskey each night appears more affected than alcoholic, though it must be the latter. Since Fabian does not understand her motivations, we are unable to understand them, either. The failure of Margaret as a character points to the limitations of Fabian's voice.

NORMAN FOUND A useful corrective for this in *The Museum Guard*. Imogen Linny at first appears to be another of Norman's eccentric women: her speech, like Margaret's, is simultaneously coy and direct; she, too, has red hair; and she toys with DeFoe, the narrator, as Margaret does with Fabian, alternately offering herself to him and withdrawing. But while DeFoe is nearly as limited as Fabian, Norman transcends his limitations. In the second half of the book, during which Imogen undergoes a transformation that is beyond DeFoe's power to grasp, she and he have almost no contact at all; we experience her only through more articulate characters.

Again Norman begins straightaway with a crime: "The painting I stole for Imogen Linny, *Jewess on a Street in Amsterdam*, arrived to the Glace Museum, here in Halifax, on September 5, 1938." DeFoe and his uncle Edward are both museum guards, but while Edward indulges happily in drink and in women, DeFoe, like Fabian, takes everything at a remove. He is unable to respond to the art that surrounds him: looking at a painting of the museum itself, his only observation is that the scale is off. In his first encounter with Imogen, he reprimands her, like a good guard, for getting too close to a painting; she responds, "Too close for your comfort, maybe. But not for mine. I was quite comfortable."

Imogen's mother, now dead, was a Dutch Jew, and she believes that "people harbor deep memories of places they've never actually been to—but where their mother lived. Memories you inherit in the womb." When the museum mounts an exhibit of contemporary Dutch paintings, Imogen grows obsessed with *Jewess on a Street in Amsterdam*. The radio broadcaster Ovid Lamartine is the catalyst for her metamorphosis; listening to his nightly news reports on the state of Europe and the rise of Hitler, she comes to believe that she is the Jewess pictured. Her soul has become estranged from itself, as she puts it, and the only way she can reconcile it is by going to Amsterdam—"right into the monster's jaw," one character says—to reunite with the painter, who she believes is her husband.

DeFoe is as disengaged from the world as Imogen is engaged with the painting; he deals with his troubles by ironing, a skill his uncle's girlfriend taught him as a boy on the day that his parents died in an accident. He wants to overcome his own estrangement, but he does not know how. Contemplating the painting, he realizes how little he knows about Imogen, in contrast with how deeply the artist understood his subject; and he reaches out to touch it, a mute and impotent gesture. He loves Imogen enough to steal the painting for her, as she asks, but then he sends it to his uncle's former girlfriend, thanking her for her "kindness on the day my parents died"—when she taught him, albeit inadvertently, that problems are better suppressed than confronted. At the end of the book, he reaches out again to touch a painting—this one of Imogen herself—and is reprimanded by the new guard: "Don't get too close, please." The reminder could come from his own subconscious.

But Imogen's literal identification with the artwork is also unhealthy, physically and spiritually. She loses her identity, speaking, dressing, and behaving as if she were the woman in the painting; and she endangers her life by traveling to Holland on the brink of World War II. The curator of the museum, Mr. Connaught, accompanies her, and through his impassioned letters home to his girlfriend, Imogen's tutor, we learn what happens to her there. The painter is at first infuriated by the sight of "this impostor," but then decides he prefers the semblance of his wife to not having her at all. He uses Imogen as a model, but refrains from any intimacy with her: "I paint this woman's clothes on her body, but there my imagination ends," he tells Mr. Connaught. When the paintings are complete, he commits suicide.

Is Imogen's assimilation of the Jewess's identity a "mockery" that brings about the death of an innocent man, or is her action "ennobling," as she believes? Imogen's mother was Jewish and she is the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery in Halifax, but she is spiritually disconnected from the religion. Some critics have protested that it is hard to believe that any Jew would deliberately travel to Europe at such a time. But are not the journeys of children and grandchildren of survivors to the cities and shtetls of Eastern Europe an expression of a desire to change places? We are not meant to take Imogen too literally; she suggests the dangers inherent, in Norman's world, in over-involvement, with art or with people.

IN *THE HAUNTING OF L.*, Norman's language has loosened up quite a bit. Hardly any trace of Fabian Vas remains. Yet the protagonist, once again, is a man with profound limitations. Peter Duvett is a darkroom assistant with the habit of mentally supplying captions to every scene: "For instance, if I left my raincoat inside on a rainy day, I would immediately think, *Man Who Forgot Raincoat Standing on Street*." After the death of his mother, he has come to Churchill, Manitoba to assist the photographer Vienna Linn; after the local missionary converts and baptizes Eskimos, he takes their portraits as evidence of the church's good works. On their wedding night, Peter becomes involved with Vienna's wife, Kala Murie, an expert on the work of Georgiana Houghton. In a book called *The Unclad*

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Spirit, Houghton described the phenomenon of "spirit photographs," in which an "uninvited guest," a friend or relative long dead, manifests himself or herself. "Alas, even if the photograph is burned, its ashes scattered to the wind, still, the memory of actually seeing the uninvited guest often long persists and can drive a person quite or near to madness." Houghton calls this a "haunting": "wherein a mental image never leaves the person alone with peace-of-mind."

Kala and Vienna are on the run from a sinister type named Radin Heur, who has been paying Vienna large sums to stage "accidents"—primarily train wrecks—and photograph them. Vienna owes him a great deal of money after bungling one of these "accidents" and failing to get the desired photos. He is enraged to discover Kala's adultery, and arranges for her to be on a plane whose crash he has already planned. Kala is badly hurt in the crash, but three Eskimos are killed, and Vienna has the idea of faking a spirit photograph: he puts in "souls" above the bodies of the two Eskimos who had been baptized, betting that Radin Heur—a "radical spiritualist"—will pay a fortune for the photograph if they can convince him that it is authentic.

This subplot would be sickening in any context, and no doubt Norman fully intends it to be so, but at this particular moment its gratuitous violence reads like a cross between J.G. Ballard and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Consider this passage, from a letter by Vienna in which he ingratiates himself with his employer by reminding him of successes past:

> The explosives had been so expertly set, there was hardly any evidence of an explosion, really. I think, yes, it was the nineteenth or twentieth car shattered apart, snapping from its predecessor, the front cars continuing on for a moment, as if a blow struck a body had not yet registered in the brain. Then came the sound of the locomotive braking. The screech of iron wheels on track echoed like a giant bird of prey. The bridge scaffolding collapsed, a train car tumbled into the gorge, followed at intervals by sheep, some of whose legs were pointing upward, all made for a rare photograph indeed, I know you agree. I did not have to feign excitement, because the sight was far more astonishing than I had imagined it to be, and I imagined it would be quite astonishing.... As for newspapers, Mr. Heur, which naturally use such terms as *acts of terrorism* when referring to political sabotage, said term cannot possibly embrace the complexities of how, between patron and artist, an end justifies a means.

But Vienna proves unable to completely "embrace the complexities." Tortured with guilt, he begins making his own spirit photographs, in which the faces of the dead Eskimos appear in the portraits of policemen he has been commissioned to do.

The Haunting of L. is the most superficially successful of Norman's books. Norman's trademark flatness, fading throughout *The Museum Guard*, is now almost imperceptible. Peter is the most likable of any of Norman's heroes; in fact, he is the only one who is not unequivocally an antihero. And he is the only one who achieves artistic satisfaction: though Vienna calls him a man "of limited imagination" and says that he has "a talent for captions, if nothing else," in the end Peter will grow frustrated with the omissions inherent in his crisp summations and will tell the full story, albeit one in which he depicts his own limitations.

At moments Norman seems to think that he is writing a suspense novel, when in fact there are few mysteries here; and the long flashback stuck in the middle, in which Peter tells of the rivalry between his aunt and his mother and the subsequent suicide of the latter, falls like a stone. For whatever reason, *The Haunting of L.* is a more mainstream novel than any of its predecessors, and lacks their sharp edges. But the real problem is that, after probing the soul so deeply in his previous book, it is Norman himself who seems to be suppressed here. A level of complexity is missing. An evil man coerces others into committing horrible crimes for the sake of "art." After doing this enough, Vienna feels guilty. Though Norman tries to force a connection between the guilt and the haunting and the uninvited guests and the pictures of train wrecks, nothing catches. He has drawn a box around these parts, but they do not fill it.

Stefan Zweig, a writer as obsessed with restraint as Howard Norman, wrote that "the stricter the limits a man sets for himself, the more clearly he approaches the eternal." In his best work, this is what Norman has achieved: one marvels at *The Museum Guard* even while tearing one's hair in frustration at its withheld emotion. But limits can quickly become limitations. Norman has satisfied the technicalities of writing a novel, but he seems not to have accepted the form's larger demands, which are infinite. The novel in the end is the least hermetic genre; it asks for more than bird drawings or photo captions do. Transcending limits can be very impressive, but the greatest writers are never uncircumscribed by the world. ■

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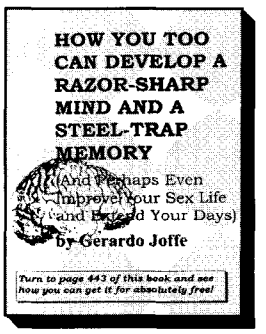
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LOS ANGELES DIARIST

Almost Famous

NOT LONG AGO, I FLEW TO Los Angeles to be a contestant on "The Weakest Link" (the syndicated version with the American dude; British cruelty artist Anne Robinson now only does celebrity competitions in her prime-time slot). While in transit, I entertained fantasies of being picked up at the airport in a limousine. A man in a black suit, mirrored sunglasses, and a fancy cap would be holding a sign with my name on it; I would toss my hair over my shoulder and in a raspy voice say, "*I'm* Sacha Zimmerman." People in the airport would turn and whisper—perhaps I was a celebrity, a TV actress; I would seem familiar to them. "I know I've seen her somewhere before," they'd say. When the plane landed, I sauntered to the baggage claim, still nursing my reverie. But once I got there, it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps my driver was supposed to meet me back at the gate. I started to run back to the escalator and promptly tripped over a loose carry-on bag, taking a decidedly unglamorous fall. I heard a man shout, "'Weakest Link' contestants!" "Here," I said, feebly raising my hand from a crumpled position on the floor. Busted.

AT THE BAGGAGE CAROUSEL, I CHIT-chatted with a fellow contestant, the affable and animated Bill, a financial aid director and veteran game-show contestant who had won $500 and a case of Dinty Moore beef stew on "Scrabble" (bet you didn't remember that was a show) in 1987. I thought about sizing him up intellectually to see how much of a threat he would be. Yet Bill was so sweet—"Isn't this exciting? What are you going to wear? Do you think they'll let me wear a sweater-vest?"—that I naïvely went to my limousine thinking we were allies. We were shepherded into separate limos (black sedans, actually, but fantasies of fame die hard in L.A.), lest we sneak in a covert strategy session. I toyed with telling the driver I was an actress on a new UPN program from the creators of "Sex and the City" called "Cosmopolitan Coeds" but decided I might not be thin enough to pull it off. At the hotel I made a number of long-distance calls to remind my friends and family that I was on the brink of fame (Wasn't Kirstie Alley discovered on "The $10,000 Pyramid"?), before looking up the periodic table and studying state capitals. Then I took advantage of the free cable and called it a day.

THE SHOW'S OFFICIALS HAD WARNED us not to "attempt to bond or talk to" our fellow contestants, so when I met the team, standing stoic in the lobby, I complimented them on not bonding. I think it broke the ice. There was Rob with the trendy shades, Cathy the lunch lady, Lamar the casino security inspector, Heather the radio station DJ, and Bill my friend from the airport. We went together to the NBC studios, where the producer explained the rules of the game to us while we all signed contracts and practiced our camera smiles. (Or at least I practiced mine—not too gummy, not too toothy, with a hint of raw, untapped potential.)

I HAD HOPED TO LOOK LIKE THE blond, black-leather-jacketed woman with intelligent eyes who's well-traveled and harbors an enchanting secret. Instead, once they'd finished with my hair and makeup, I looked like a bubbly, blond sorority girl from a Big Ten college who majors in marketing and has stuffed animals in the rear window of her Ford Explorer. No one noticed my new sorority do except for trendy-shades Rob who, at 37, still seems like the kind of guy who hangs out at college bars and buys drinks for young women. He told me I looked great and then lurked behind me the rest of the day, muttering something about a "psycho ex-girlfriend" and "nice Jewish girls." I decided to vote him off first.

WE WENT INTO THE STUDIO TO MEET our host, George Gray. He is, to be blunt, no Anne Robinson. Where Anne is a wry and calculating arbiter, George is a shmaltzy former stand-up comic. When the game started, I floundered. So focused was I on holding in my stomach and relaxing the twitch in my frozen smile that I utterly lost the ability to think. I was certain I would be voted off right away. (I had blown it, I told myself. I was a one-termer. I was George H.W. Bush.) Yet, unbelievably, I wasn't expelled. Instead, DJ Heather, who had missed no questions, was given the boot. I surveyed the team: They all loved me; they couldn't bear to vote against me. Either that or, as it suddenly dawned on me, the men had an alliance—why else would they all vote off Heather?

IN THE NEXT SEGMENT I MADE A stunning comeback and was the strongest link. I felt brilliant, deftly answering questions on the finer points of golf ("What sport uses both putters and drivers?") and the intricacies of Martha Stewart's business empire ("What is the full name of the host of 'From Martha's Garden'?"). Screw "The Weakest Link"—I should have been on "Jeopardy." As an added bonus, it was my prerogative as strongest link to break a tie and vote off trendy-shades Rob. But before I could continue my domination I was forced to banter with George—the portion of the show when the host ridicules the contestants. After establishing that I like to shoot pool, he asked me if I ever bet on games. I tried to tell him that I didn't, but for some reason it came out as: "I'm not a pool whore." It was then that I learned that introducing the word "whore" into a verbal spat (particularly a televised one) is not a smart move. Call it a life lesson. "Well, what kind of whore are you?" he beamed, leaving me to contemplate my sudden transformation from nice sorority girl to game-show tramp. "Nice rack!" George exclaimed, clearly pleased with himself. I wondered whether this would help my viability as a starlet.

MY STRONG STREAK CONTINUED. (Strong, that is, except for a wee mistake wherein I said that Bill Clinton was older than George W. Bush; I'm sure my colleagues will stop teasing me about it any day now.) Ultimately it came down to me, casino Lamar, and airport Bill. Male alliance or no male alliance, I figured, Bill and I were friends and he'd protect me. Except he didn't. Bill and Lamar voted me off. They claimed fear; each said he thought he had a better chance against the other than against me. Ah, the beauty of a game show that penalizes competence and rewards stupidity. For what it's worth, Bill went on to win $10,250.

AFTER THE SHOW, THE TEAM HEADED for the hotel bar, where each of us proceeded to analyze every possible avenue the show could have gone down—in other words, what it would have taken for each of us, rather than Bill, to win. Bill bought everyone drinks and apologized for voting me off the show. This seemed a classy move (at least once I'd had a couple of drinks), and I decided that I had been on television long enough to be discovered anyway. So I forgave Bill and yelled at trendy-shades Rob, who had been bitterly lamenting my ousting of him, "Seriously man, let it go!" Then I flew home. It's been more than a week now since the show aired; I expect I'll be getting my big break any day now.

SACHA ZIMMERMAN

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School Choice and the Constitution

The Washington Post *published the following editorial on March 1 regarding the pending U.S. Supreme Court decision on the Cleveland school voucher program:*

Nobody doubts that public schools in many communities are failing their children. No one doubts, either, that wealthier families have an escape valve: They can pay for private schools or move to communities with better public schools. It's the poor who get stuck in systems that too often prepare the next generation only for more poverty. In the face of this longstanding and unacceptable inequity, we don't have much patience with those who would block creative experimentation in a search for solutions.

One such program — [school] vouchers in Cleveland — [is] before the Supreme Court...facing a constitutional challenge.... The case represents an important test of how much wiggle room state and local governments will get from the courts. The justices need to avoid dramatically lowering the church-state wall, but they can do so...and still uphold the program.

In principle, there is no reason why a carefully designed voucher program should offend the Constitution. The money is given to parents, not directly to schools, and it flows to schools only as a function of parental choices.... In this sense, vouchers are not all that different from other programs the court has already upheld.... The key is for the justices to avoid using a broad principle that would allow more direct aid to parochial schools.

Parental School Choice is Widespread — Unless You're Poor.

The only reason the Cleveland case is at all difficult is that while the money formally follows the students, it has functioned in practice largely to put children into religious schools.... [This] has several causes. Most...private schools in Cleveland are religious schools. The...relatively small size of the vouchers — $ 2,250 for low-income students — tends to limit the participation of schools that don't have major religious groups to subsidize them. Two of the participating private secular schools, moreover, turned themselves into charter schools.... And while the Cleveland program would also pay for students to attend suburban public schools, none of those school systems has been willing to participate.

Unquestionably, Cleveland's program would be easier to defend were its vouchers larger — as they should be — and its range of private schools more diverse. But this distinction...makes little sense as a constitutional test. The courts cannot be the arbiters of how much a voucher must be worth to pass First Amendment muster. Nobody is required to take a voucher, or to spend it at a religious school. And state law offers other secular choices as well — charter and magnet schools, for example. Absent any sign of coercion, the program seems to us within the range of experiments that the First Amendment should be read to permit. Were it struck down, it's hard to see how such experiments could continue without judicial micromanagement.

Additional coverage of the Supreme Court case, and information about Cleveland's choice program can be found at SchoolChoiceInfo.org.

baeo
Black Alliance for Educational Options

For more information go to: www.schoolchoiceinfo.org or www.baeo.org

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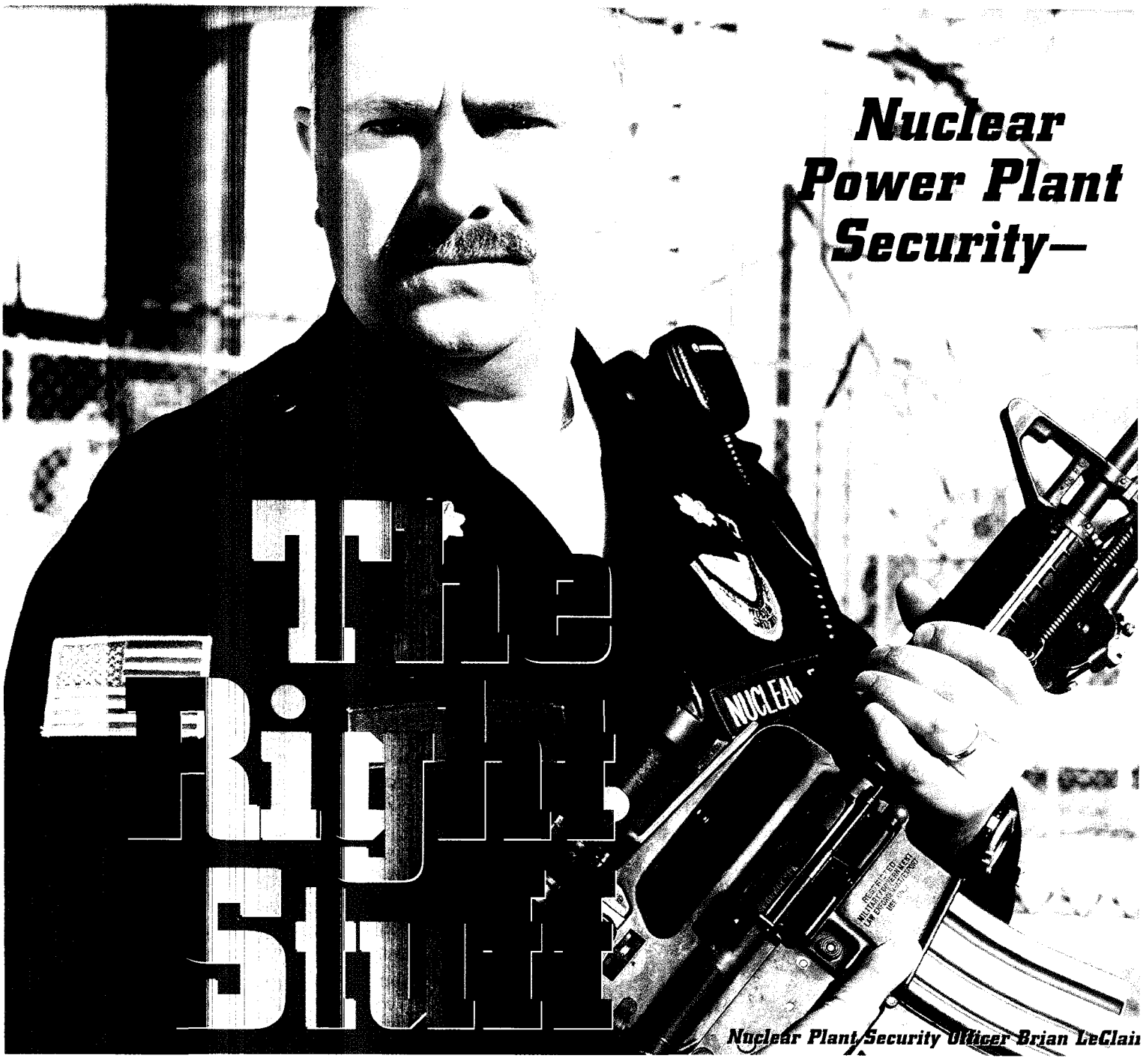

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